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Keishi Ayasato
Illustration by
Saki Ukai
Torture Princess
Fremd Torturchen

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✦✦✦✦ At the World's End, Atop a Farcical Stage
"Waltz."

“Come now...
...let’s see whose paternal love is stronger!”
Battle of the Fathers

✦✦✦✦ Vlad's Diary

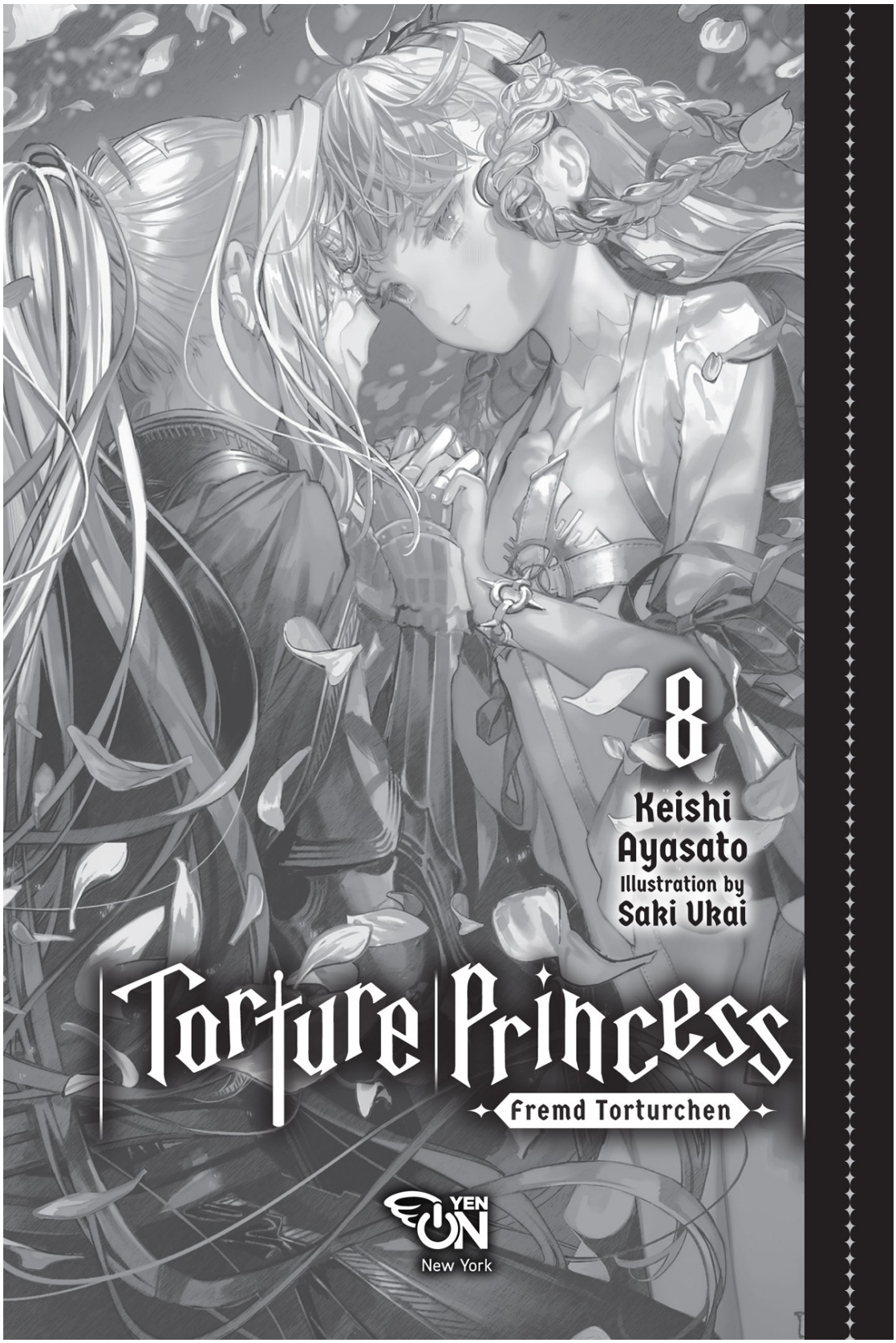
Cloudy weather (on account of all the burning bodies), unpleasantly brisk, and no battles against demons—though the situation is in swift decline.

I found my precious daughter's diary, so I took it upon myself to add an entry.
I can already picture how livid she'll be when she finds out. Ah, I can't wait.
Imagine my surprise, though, when I flipped through it and discovered that my dear successor—and a host of others—penned their own entries as well.
I can't imagine why no one thought to ask me to contribute.
That aside, I must say, my dear successor's entries are positively dripping with his personality.
"I want you to know something. I love you both. From the bottom of my heart."
What a delightful sentiment. And for the record, I'm being totally sincere when I say that.
My dear successor saw his love through to the end.
And that is one act of folly that none can look down on.
Until him, I had never met nor even heard of a fool so great their folly could save the world.
If he were here, he would doubtless be appalled by the current state of affairs.
Ah, but even so, he'd probably still try to save everything and everyone.
My dear son, I know of no other glass marble so utterly twisted yet so perfectly clear as you.
People are hideous. Beastfolk, demi-humans, those of mixed race—they're all the same, too.
Our entire world rests atop a farcical stage. Yet even so, my children are beautiful.
They were beautiful, and that is something that can never be taken from them.
And for the record, I'm being completely sincere when I say that. Not that you'll believe me, I imagine.

Today's menu..... These days, it's all just combat rations.
My reaction..... And you know, I have the sneaking suspicion that they're giving me all the worst ones.

Today's Dear Successor ..... Sleeping.
Today's Precious Daughter ..... Lonely...Far lonelier than she realizes.

Now then, let's draw today's entry to a close.
I hope my precious daughter reads this soon
so that I can savor the look of fury on her face.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Copyright

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Keishi Ayasato
Illustration by Saki Ukai
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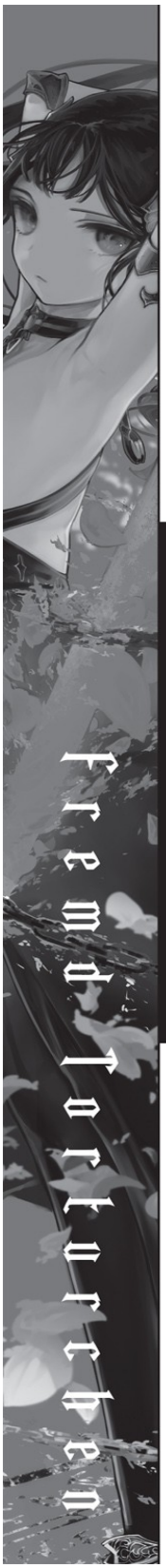


Characters

Elisabeth Le Fanu

The Torture Princess. A beautiful woman who massacred her people, her acts of torture even extending to the nobles. Had been ordered by the Church to punish those who contracted with demons and told, "Before the day of your death, try to do some good at least." After Ragnarok, her execution was postponed indefinitely. Currently working to stop the mixed-blood rebellion.

Hina

An automaton maid once built by Vlad. Kaito's eternal lover, companion, soldier, weapon, love toy, sex doll, and bride. During Ragnarok, she chose to get sealed away alongside Kaito.

Vlad Le Fanu

The creator of the Torture Princess. Elisabeth's self-proclaimed father. Had formed a contract with the Kaiser, the strongest of the fourteen ranked demons, but was subjugated by Elisabeth. After Ragnarok, the spare copy of his soul formed a tenuous alliance with the three races.

Kaito Sena

A young man, brutally killed after a life of abuse. He was summoned by Elisabeth and made to work as her servant. During Ragnarok, he took God and Diablo into his body and sealed himself away in a crystal.

Jeanne de Rais

A young girl who calls herself the saint and the whore. Her true nature is that of a man-made Torture Princess created by the alchemists. After Ragnarok, she sided with the three races. Didn't she convey her feelings to Izabella...?

Izabella Vicker

Current commander of the Holy Knights. Possesses powerful mana, a gallant spirit, and a deft sword arm. After Ragnarok, she devoted herself to helping humanity and the other two races rebuild. Didn't she hear Jeanne's confession...?

The Kaiser

With the advice and aid of the soul replica that Vlad left behind, Kaito summoned the strongest of the fourteen ranked demons once more. The Kaiser has taken an interest in Vlad and Kaito, calling the former "He Who Rears Hell Within His Mind" and the latter "Accumulation of Seventeen Years' Pain."

Alice Carroll

A girl who, just like Kaito Sena, was born in modern-day Japan, led a tortured life, and died at the hands of her abuser. Her real name is Sara Yuuki. After being reincarnated in a new world, Lewis granted her the power and title of Fremd Torturchen—"Torture Princess from Another World." Her morals are extremely lacking, and she'll do whatever her "father," Lewis, tells her to.

Lute

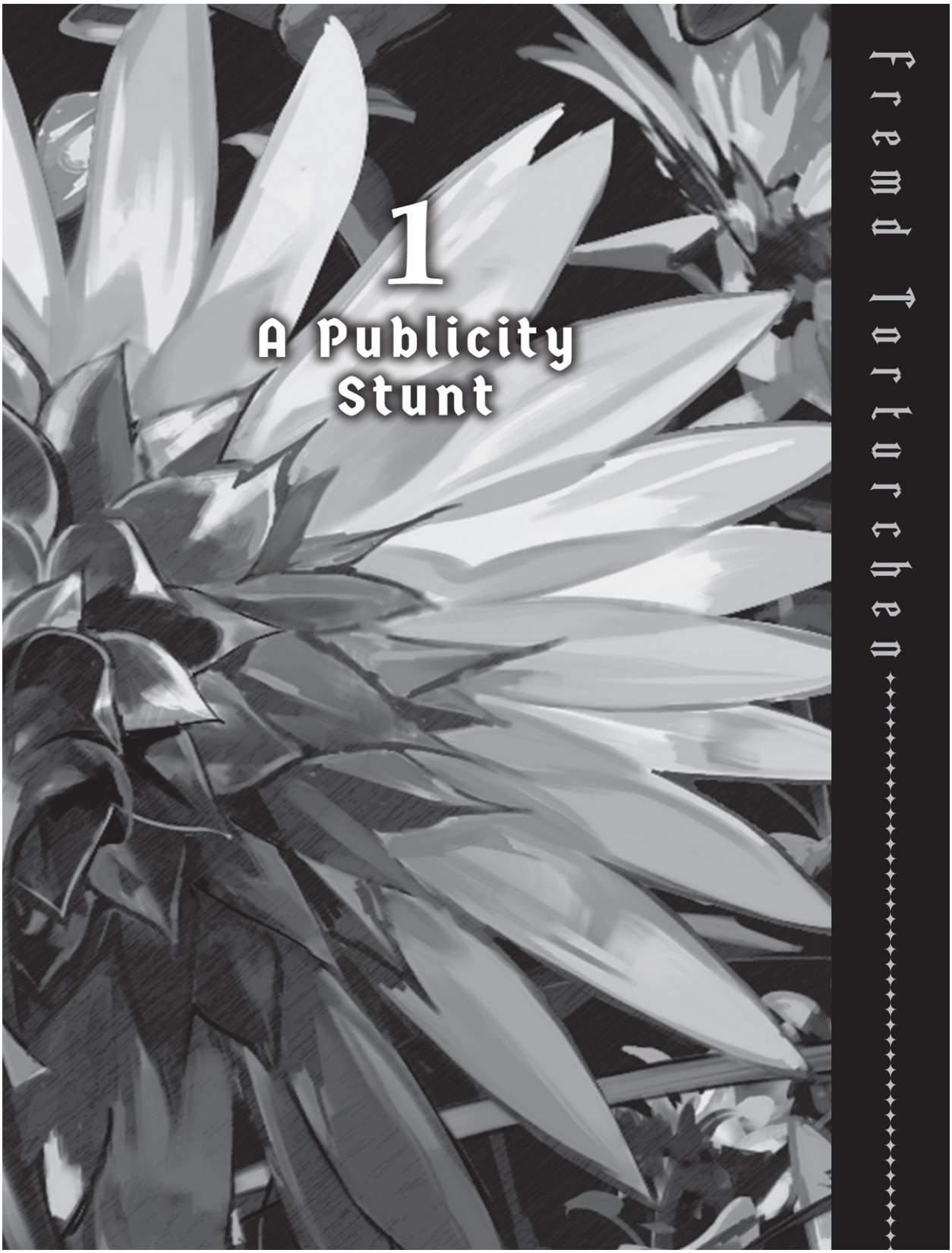
A wolf beastman. He's the commanding officer of the first squad of Vyade Ula Forstlast's private army, a woman who in turn is the second imperial princess of the Forest King, one of the forefathers of all beastfolk. Currently serving under Elisabeth in the Peace Brigade. He has a goatwoman wife.

Lewis

Alice Carroll's "father" and the man who summoned Sara Yuuki from another world and granted her a name. After using information about the battle against the Grand King in the Capital to create a demon child, he repeatedly iterated on the horrible process to create an even more powerful demon. Then, with its meat, he was able to summon the Fremd Torturchen. An insurgent who's willing to do anything to accomplish his goals yet seems to lack any ambition of his own.

The Saint

The Church's object of worship, the "Suffering Saint." She's the mother of all creation who once carried out the reconstruction and created the Butcher as well as the grand sinner who brought about the end of days. After the world was saved during Ragnarok, she went into hiding alone.



1
A Publicity Stunt

1
A Publicity Stunt

The room was red.

Its walls, floor, and ceiling were all dyed the color of fresh blood.

It was the kind of scene that burrowed its way into your eyeballs and chipped away at your mind. After all, staying calm and levelheaded when your entire field of view was filled with crimson was no easy task. In contrast with its violent hue, however, the room itself was constructed in an exceedingly normal manner.

Firewood was stacked beside its hearth, and it had a cupboard decorated with modest little ornaments. The room also had a plain, well-built desk, and atop it sat two teacups. Each was filled with milk tea.

Suddenly, a pale hand holding a silver spoon reached out. Grains of sugar cascaded down from the spoon and sank into the piping hot beverage.

There, in that red, crimson, scarlet room—

—in that room that looked like a gaping wound gouged out of flesh—

—the two of them spent their days as though it were the most natural thing in the world.

“Here you are, Master Kaito. It’s still hot, so do be careful.”

“Got it. Thanks, Hina.”

Kaito Sena nodded as he took the cup. His short hair’s tied-back knot swayed as he took a sip.

Sitting in the seat across from him was a beautiful maid.

It was his eternal lover, his beloved automaton wife, Hina.

Aside from their seats, the dining table also had a third chair. But that chair was empty.

The vacuum it left was hollow and lonesome. Not only was the room itself perverse, it was also missing something important. However, they enjoyed their peaceful teatime all the same. But all of a sudden, that genial silence was shattered.

A ghastly noise was ringing off in the distance.

It was frail and shrill yet ominous all the same. It sounded like someone screaming or perhaps someone wailing in resentment.

It was the sound of swords ringing, of flesh being eaten, of people being consumed, of crying, of screaming, and of all other noises combined.

Hina turned her emerald eyes downward and let out a quiet murmur.

“It’s started…hasn’t it?”

“Yeah. It has.”

Kaito looked down at the faintly cloudy surface of his tea and nodded. However, even though he himself was the one who fended off the end of days, he didn't seem particularly surprised. He went on matter-of-factly.

"I mean, I always knew it was going to happen. Every living creature is ignorant, every living creature is like a stupid animal, and every living creature is precious. And that's why they're worth protecting. But at the same time, it's also why they can never escape ruin. It's just the way they are… But still, just three years? That's crazy fast."

"It is, but it seems the stone began rolling before the final battle even began."

"Yeah. The question is, what's gonna happen now? The mixed-race folk are one thing, but the bigger problem is this new reincarnation. I dunno if she and her allies even realize that…or I guess I should say I dunno if they realize just how dangerous she is. 'This time, I'm going to accomplish everything I set out to do,' huh?"

Kaito frowned. He himself was proof of the power of that sentiment. That "conception" possessed by those who met cruel deaths could form the basis for limitless magical growth. But what if there wasn't anything that the person in question wanted to accomplish?

A hollow vessel had the power to change its shape at will. It was impossible to tell what it would give the world and what it would do.

Would it love or would it hate?

Would it be just or would it be evil?

"In my case, I was filled with love. That much I know. But what even is justice? I'm still not sure."

Back when he was alive, the Mad King obtained unrivaled power. Yet even so, he wasn't able to save everyone. He was aware of countless tragedies yet didn't reach out to prevent more than a scant few.

And Kaito wasn't alone in that.

The innocent begged for mercy, but nobody lent them an ear. Many committed horrible acts, and those who didn't merely stood by as spectators.

Eventually, punishment always caught up with sin.

Stupid sheep only saw what they wanted to see and only heard what they wanted to hear.

Would they be granted salvation? Even just asking was completely shameless. In a world where God and Diablo actually existed, wishing for convenient miracles to occur was nothing short of comical. The living needed to learn their lesson already.

Salvation wasn't coming.

Eventually, all of them would die and the world along with them.

That was the answer. Not a single person had the right to criticize the current rebellion.

However, a single foolish person murmured,

"Yet even so…"

And now it was all beginning.

“Yeah, Elisabeth, that’s right… Yet even so…”

Kaito didn’t finish the rest. Now that he noticed, the noise was gone. Everything was quiet again. Of course, the room was completely sequestered from the outside world. It was distant from everything. It would be strange if anything *were* audible.

The room was red. It had no windows. It had no doors.

No one could leave. And no one could enter. It was almost like a graveyard. Or perhaps a prison.

And in that place, that place where no one ought to be

the two of them just sat.

*

The sound of burning meat filled the air, as did the smell of charred flesh.

Somewhere, people were burning.

A bell rang off in the distance. The ground was hot, and the sky was black with smoke and ash.

The land, the trees, the grass—everything was burning. The water was bitter, and countless were dead. A single bird flew through the sky, crying loudly as it went.

A slender man gazed up at it. The hem of his black, aristocratic coat swayed as he murmured.

“‘A calamity cometh. A calamity cometh. To all the people of the land. The coming messenger aims to blow the bugle of the end.’ …Or something to that effect, I imagine. It does resemble the second coming of the end of days, though, doesn’t it?”

“Still thy tongue, Vlad. If you wish to wax poetic about tragedy, then go become a wandering minstrel or something.”

Someone standing behind Vlad shot him a biting remark. However, Vlad offered no response. He just kept gazing upward.

Hard footsteps echoed out as the other speaker approached from behind. Her black hair and the hem of her lascivious bondage dress fluttered behind the beautiful woman when she came to a halt. She looked up as well, her crimson gaze cutting through the ashen wind.

Then the Torture Princess—Elisabeth Le Fanu—spoke.

“At the moment, we’ve no messenger, no God, no Diablo. Just a fat lot of survivors from the end of days trying to kill one another. Yet again, you succeed in being naught but foolish and annoy— Hmm? You’re finished? Were there any survivors on the east side?”

“A-allow me…to give my report…”

The answer to Elisabeth’s question came from the human conscript a little ways off.

He had come running over from the houses to the east. Behind his metal epaulets, she could see a group of soldiers carrying bodies out of the still-burning houses. It was clear that most of the victims had already perished.

The soldiers carried the brutalized corpses to the central plaza one after another.

Although she was still waiting for the conscript's answer, the number of bodies she saw gave Elisabeth a fair inkling of what it would be. He came to a stop before her. Not forgetting to salute, he placed his arm horizontally across his chest as he spoke.

"No luck… It was horrible! As far as we can tell, they slaughtered the entire town! Women, children, even unborn babies… It was just like all the others."

He clamped his mouth shut, no doubt resisting the urge to vomit. His face was blackened with soot and swollen from inflammation. The air inside the houses was still scorching hot. They had fought back the fires as part of their search-and-rescue mission, but they hadn't had time to put them out completely.

In spite of all that, he was shivering as badly as if he'd just taken shelter from a blizzard.

Upon hearing the peculiar phrase *even unborn babies*, Elisabeth clicked her tongue.

"Tch, again? How tasteless. And how *persistent*. This goes beyond the level of mere amusement."

All of a sudden, Vlad slowly turned to them and spoke.

"Isn't it just proof of how exceedingly deep the rebels' hatred runs, precious daughter of mine? Not to say that there isn't a pragmatic reason as well, but as for their fundamental motive, I've little doubt that it's just pure unadulterated loathing."

Elisabeth made no efforts to hide her grimace, and the conscript let out a small gasp.

Vlad grinned gleefully. It was a decidedly unsettling sight in a place as hellish as that. He went on, seemingly unfazed by the other two's revulsion.

"'You're different from us… That means I can do whatever I want to you.' It's a cruel piece of rationalization some humans once came up with. Depressingly shallow logic, to be sure, and nothing but base sophistry designed to ward off feelings of guilt. You see, the true reason people have to show compassion to others is so *they don't get killed themselves*. But those humans violated that rule, taking those of mixed race just as intelligent as them and butchering them like animals."

And that had led directly to this.

"A natural conclusion," Vlad whispered softly.

"How can you even say something like that?!" the conscript cried back. However, Elisabeth placed a hand atop the man's shoulder to settle him down. There was nothing to be gained from getting worked up about the things Vlad said.

Even as she ignored him, though, Elisabeth couldn't help but have a thought cross her mind.

'Tis far too indiscriminate to be neatly written off as retribution.

She closed her eyes, then opened them.

Now then, what to make of the grisly spectacle laid out before the Torture Princess?

Buildings were burning. People were dead. Their corpses lined the streets. And ash rained from the sky.

At the moment, Elisabeth and the others were in a nameless, medium-size village.

It had been attacked by the rebels, and everyone within had been slaughtered.

*

Originally, it had been just another unremarkable remote village.

Its population was on the larger side, and it produced a decent amount of wheat. However, it wasn't linked to any major roads, didn't have any large farms or factories where magic item components were produced, and wasn't home to any rich deposits of ore.

Attacking it might earn you a little money but nothing beyond that. By the time news reached the Capital that something had happened there, though, Elisabeth and the others were already too late. The village had been set ablaze, and the slaughter was finished.

Because the villagers had chosen to prioritize looking for survivors, the fires in the fields and storehouses yet raged, but the dirty rain would take care of them in time. A charred weather vane creaked as it spun atop a burning roof.

And down beneath its watchful gaze sat the villagers' corpses. However, the fire wasn't what had killed them.

Their chests had been ripped open, their rib cages smashed, and their hearts extracted all while they were still alive. And the pregnant women's children—the aforementioned unborn babies—were no exception. They, too, had been ripped from their mothers and had their organs savagely extracted, an act so barbaric it called into question the sanity of the perpetrators. However, there was a reason why the horrific acts had been carried out the way they had.

After all, of course there was. Neither side had completely descended into madness just yet.

In other words, there had to be *some* reason.

At least for the time being.

Elisabeth murmured the rebels' original motive aloud.

"Revenge for the fact that the Mixed-Race Massacre continued even after Ragnarok, then?"

The story began a little while before the three races successfully staved off the end of days.

When confronted with the annihilation that was the end of the world, many people lost their minds. As a result of that, they began killing heretics despite the fact that none of their doctrine called on them to do so. It was their attempt at demonstrating their piety toward God and begging for salvation.

Because the mixed-race people looked different from them and were close at hand, they made for obvious targets.

And the incidents continued even after the end of days was averted. There were myriad reasons why, such as the reconstruction sect pulling strings and people fearing that another calamity was on the horizon.

The widespread knowledge of Diablo's confirmed existence also caused a marked increase in people conducting ritual sacrifices. When it came to piety, though, that village fell in one of the former categories.

At times, rustic simplicity and zealous devotion can make for an alarming combination.

Elisabeth sifted through her memories.

There was an incident she could recall from about a year back.

A disturbing report had been brought to a church near that village.

According to the report, a group of mixed-race vagrants had gone missing one after another in the area around the village she was now standing in.

That led to a party of truth seekers being dispatched, but the villagers all seemed like devout people; none of them said anything suspicious, and the group couldn't find proof of any actual wrongdoing. And how could they? The villagers blindly believed that their actions were just and good. There was no reason why any of them would slip up, and there was no way they would leave any evidence. With all the villagers working together, it was nigh impossible for a rural church's investigation to see through their cover-up.

And thus, the truth vanished into darkness…or so they thought.

"'Twould seem our mixed-race friends caught wind of what they did. One of them must have plied some friendly peddler with booze, and once their tongue slipped, that was that. Given the uniformity with which the villagers were slain, the mixed-race people were no doubt trying to repay like with like."

As Elisabeth swept her gaze over the bodies, she narrowed her eyes. The putrid stench of death was strong and traveled well.

The truth had been leaked, and revenge had been carried out. Retribution had caught up with sin.

Still, the act of butchering not only children but also babies goes beyond the pale. In all likelihood…

Perhaps having guessed what Elisabeth was thinking, Vlad let out a quiet soliloquy and voiced the words in her stead.

“Gender, age, creed…they didn’t have the freedom to weigh such things when determining who they should and should not kill, my precious daughter. Not if they wanted to blindly insist that justice was on their side, like the villagers themselves did back when they were alive. For they knew that when they sobered up from their stupor of blood and pretext, all that awaited them were their own broken souls.”

In short, such was the nature of the act. He shrugged calmly as he gazed at the grisly spectacle.

“Avengers really are a troublesome lot, aren’t they? The more righteous a man’s motives, the deeper his obsession, the crueler his methods, and the sooner he brings about his own ruin… I can’t say I hate it, but it is a little gloomy for my tastes.”

“Vlad, no one gives half a damn about your opinions. As I just said, if you intend to compose poetry like a jester, then go find yourself a more suitable profession and venue. If you have time to wax poetic, that time would be better spent doing your job.”

“Oh? And what job might that be, my precious daughter? What is it you would ask of me?”

Vlad tilted his head to the side in a feigned display of innocence. As he did, his malevolent smile broadened.

Instead of immediately answering him, Elisabeth began walking. The conscript hurriedly followed after her. She was headed to the plaza, where the soldiers were still in the middle of moving the victims. The body count was high, and their work had no end in sight.

As such, Elisabeth knew what they needed to do.

“That should go without saying—help carry the bodies.”

A bird cried out. An eagle cried out. A crow cried out.

A calamity cometh. A calamity cometh.

To all the people of the land.

*

A few days ago, the world’s peace had been shattered once more.

The mixed-race people had declared war against the three races.

Not only had the rebels’ spokesperson Lewis inherited the mixed-race organization’s assets, knowledge, and technology, he had also successfully created the Fremd Torturchen, Alice Carroll, and the demon grandchildren.

In contrast, the three races’ preparations for war were decidedly lacking. After avoiding the end of days, they chose to pour all their resources into the reconstruction efforts. Plus, humanity’s repeated battles against demons had left them exhausted.

It was hard to find anyone who hadn’t lost something important to them. They weren’t mentally ready for another war.

But revenge waits for no man.

The curtain had risen on a new stage, whether the performers wanted it to or not. The conflict had begun. However, no large-scale fighting had broken out yet. At the moment, the big battle they were expecting had yet to come.

Even so, the death count was soaring higher by the hour.

And the people who were directly slaughtered weren't the only victims.

"Where are we putting the bodies we've yet to examine? Ah, I see. Very well… Hmm?"

Elisabeth, who'd been transporting the corpse of a middle-aged man, suddenly stopped. She looked up.

Over by the plaza's well, a silver-haired woman was talking to a mage from the royal castle.

Noticing Elisabeth's gaze, the woman returned it and looked over at her. Her face was beautiful and well proportioned. However, it was also covered in bizarre machinations, and a good half of her cheek was full of spinning cogwheels.

Izabella Vicker narrowed her dignified blue and purple eyes and called over to Elisabeth in a solemn tone.

"Elisabeth, just the person I was looking for. I have news. Just as you suspected, the water was poisoned."

"Sure enough. So that's the cause behind the strange acrid odor I smelled."

Elisabeth nodded. She'd first noticed it the moment they arrived at the village.

The air was thick with smoke from the burning bodies, but she'd been able to make out a faint irritant amid the other smells. The bitter aroma had already been scattered by the wind, so it was hard to make out, but given the fact she could make it out at all, it must have pervaded the entire area during the time of the attack.

Izabella held up two small vials between her fingers. One had water from the well and the other had water from the village's irrigation channel, but both had a layer of viscous green liquid floating at their tops.

Izabella grimly gave voice to her mage companion's hypothesis.

"It's the same kind as what the underlings emitted during Ragnarok. I never would have imagined that anyone but us got their hands on any, much less analyzed it and managed to reproduce it. Now, fortunately, they weren't able to amplify its strength the way Sir Kaito did. If anything, they diluted it. Even so, any attempts to use this water to fight the fire would have caused a massive cloud of poisonous haze to spread through the town in an instant. That's undoubtedly why we didn't find any traces of the villagers fighting back."

"The haze cleared in time, but even then, the poison remained in the well and channels. As always, it seems they've little interest in keeping the land fit for future use. It's as though their goal is merely to dot the human

map with unhabitable blots. Between that and the fact that they raid with small groups, set fires, spread poison, kill all they can, and promptly flee…"

"That's right. In short…it's the same as the other villages that were hit."

With a stern expression on her face, Izabella pointed at the rows of corpses.

Elisabeth followed her finger. The first responder combat medics were conducting an inspection of the bodies. Their skill with healing magic was lacking, but they made up for it with their unparalleled knowledge of anatomy.

At the moment, they were using gender, age, and any other characteristics they could make out to compare the dead against the village's population register.

Given their clouded expressions, Elisabeth could guess at their findings.

"Too few corpses to account for the whole town, eh… Again?"

"Of course. The ones slaughtered weren't the only victims. Many, such as the village leaders and their families, were abducted. And hoo boy, they're in for some nasty shit! Hell, they'd be better off havin' their hearts ripped clean outta their chests! At least that way they'd die quick!"

For how crass the words were, the voice was surprisingly demure.

Elisabeth and Izabella turned.

A girl who resembled a mannequin was coming toward them from the main road that led to the village's meeting hall. Her porcelain skin gleamed under a bondage dress even more risqué than Elisabeth's. The girl shook her head lightly to the side.

Doing so caused her golden hair to sway luxuriously. Her rose-red eyes were fixed emotionlessly on the scene before her.

It was yet another Torture Princess—Jeanne de Rais.

"As suspected, I found this lurking in the belfry. **Fucker was watchin' us pull cleanup duty!**"

Jeanne took what she was holding and violently tossed it on the ground.

The hideous creature crashed onto the cobblestones with a thud. It was a familiar, one that looked like someone had taken an eagle and affixed it to a piglet. There was no doubt that it belonged to the rebels. Izabella grimaced and shook her head.

Jeanne's tone was dispassionate, but her eyes gleamed like rubies.

"I also found traces of a teleportation circle behind the meeting hall. It was the same as the ones we found in the other villages' churches, graveyards, and other large buildings. And just as before, it was impossible to trace back to its source. **Those punks are a lotta things, but weak ain't one of 'em. They work quick and dirty, but that just ends up makin' it harder to track 'em. Shit's like tryin' to follow a hunting hound who dug up the whole damn neighborhood along the way.**"

"That's what they used to abscond with the villagers, no doubt."

Jeanne gave Elisabeth's low murmur a nod. Izabella clenched her fists tight.

"Not again… They can't keep getting away with this barbarity. Their desire for revenge is one thing, but these acts are beyond forgiveness."

"That goes without saying, my lady. Thing is, though, they don't give a rat's ass if you forgive 'em or not. That's just how avengers roll."

Elisabeth thought over one of the words Izabella just said.

It was that *again*.

All the other attack sites they'd gone to had had the exact same pattern of victims. The kidnappings were no doubt happening because the rebels needed "mothers" for their demon grandchildren. Jeanne was right. Death would be far preferable to the fate that awaited the taken.

To hammer that point home, the rebels had begun leaving the burst corpses of such victims in various towns and villages, almost like a warning.

Committing sporadic acts of slaughter and plunder and leaving provocative displays in their wake… This is no normal war.

Elisabeth narrowed her eyes as she thought. Jeanne, guessing at what was going through her mind, replied.

"That's right—what they're doing *isn't* warfare. And it's different from the underlings' indiscriminate destruction as well."

"In short, this is all one grand act of revenge—nothing more, nothing less? Is that what you're saying?"

Jeanne gave Elisabeth's question a nod.

Elisabeth turned to Izabella, wanting to hear her take on the matter. When she did, though, she realized something.

At some point, Izabella had begun looking at Vlad.

The man in question was standing in front of the crushed familiar with a thin smirk on his face. The viewpoint he had to offer on "evil" was valuable to them, so he was being allowed to travel alongside them, but by all rights he was a criminal who was supposed to be locked up.

That made him suspicious even under the best circumstances, and what he was doing now certainly wasn't helping his case. Izabella squinted at him, trying to figure out what he was after.

Noticing her apprehension, Vlad spread his arms wide.

"Ah, was I being too quiet? I suppose if all I do is attract suspicion, that makes me rather useless indeed. I'm not a jester sent to liven up the proceedings, after all. I suppose it's high time I did my job and elucidated the situation a little."

Then his expression did a complete one-eighty and became as serious as could be.

There were some truths that could only be gleaned by the truly evil. Vlad began giving his explanation.

“These massacres were no act of war. They were a revenge drama, *a performance designed to stir up a fell wind*. A *publicity stunt*, if you will. The main act is sure to follow soon.”

“A…fell wind? A publicity stunt? What in the world are you going on about?”

Vlad’s words were as cryptic as they were irreverent. Izabella’s distrust grew deeper yet. However, Elisabeth understood what he was getting at. Vlad went on without offering Izabella any clarification.

“‘A calamity cometh. A calamity cometh. To all the people of the land.’ *That* is what our mixed-race friends are trying to convey, and therein lies their plan. After all, total war is a fool’s errand.”

An image from the past flashed through Elisabeth’s mind.

Dark figures blotting out the sky like clouds.

Massive flocks, all taking off from the forest around the World Tree at once. Birds crying out. Eagles crying out. Crows crying out.

Then a familiar blowing the bugle.

“I’ll take this world, I’ll make it my own, and I’ll kill every last fool who walks upon it. And at the end of the day, it doesn’t matter whether I do anything; it won’t affect our ultimate fate. Salvation isn’t coming, ladies and gentlemen. Not for you, not for anyone. And certainly not for me.

“The sun has gone dark—now, let the killing commence.

“We, the mixed-race folk, hereby declare our rebellion against you.”

That was the declaration of war Lewis made. But even with a few of the demi-humans on his side, wiping out the three races was still a distant pipe dream. His side was far better prepared, but he was also facing down an overwhelming disparity in manpower and resources. That said, the same had been true of the Mad King. And in his case, even though it had taken a fair number of accidents and coincidences to get there, he had nonetheless obtained power sufficient to overthrow the entire world.

Depending on the Fremd Torturchen’s strength, it might well be possible to overturn the world’s power structure.

However, maintaining power and stability for any length of time was another matter altogether. Trying to lump the three races together and rule over them as a single unit was just asking for disaster.

Lewis and his people knew that.

Yet even so, they were trying to become proper shepherds. After rooting out everyone responsible for the Mixed-Race Massacre, their goal was to rule over the world to prevent such a tragedy from ever happening again.

In other words, their dream was the realization of a perfect, idealized utopia.

Short of a literal miracle, such an absurd future will never come to pass.

Alternatively, they could merely obtain so much power that people would have no choice but to obey them unconditionally.

That would require an immense deterrent, exactly like the kind the Saint had sought out.

Namely, God and Diablo.

And if that's the case, then it's all too clear what this "fell wind" of theirs shall be.

Before she could finish her thought, though, Elisabeth found herself interrupted.

The sound of a bell clanging rang out.

It was a signal from their lookout stationed by the teleportation circle just outside the village.

Someone was coming.

*

"Messenger! Messenger!"

Before anyone could jump to conclusions, a deep voice cut through the air.

It was the lookout, stating the nature of their new visitor. It was just a messenger from the Capital, nothing more. Once the soldiers realized that there wasn't an emergency, they visibly relaxed. However, Elisabeth took off at a dash.

Izabella, Jeanne, and even Vlad, for some reason, raced along after her.

The four of them whizzed past scorched buildings as they raced down the road. Elisabeth was filled with an ominous premonition.

Right now, the three races are constantly exchanging communications.

Consequently, operating the communication devices was taking all the personnel the Capital had. They certainly didn't have the manpower to spare by sending valuable civil officials off to minor villages with no strategic value. Something major must have happened to warrant taking such measures.

And even if not, no good can come of anyone arriving under such circumstances, regardless of their allegiance!

Eventually, Elisabeth and the others arrived at the humble fence that surrounded the village.

Dirt flew up by Elisabeth's feet as she skidded to a halt. Before her sat a teleportation circle enclosed in a cylindrical wall of light. A moment later, that wall cracked and shattered, descending to the ground in a rain of glowing droplets.

Standing atop the circle was a man clad in a silken robe—a man Elisabeth recognized.

He was normally stationed in the tomb that served as the temporary royal castle, and his job was to keep an eye out for if the rebels tried to make contact.

As Elisabeth took that fact in, the man strode forward. His stride was sure, but his face was flushed and damp with sweat. After taking a moment to catch his breath, he spoke.

“I come bearing news! The rebel forces have added more to their proclamation!”

“Now, eh? I’d have thought it would come a good deal sooner—either that or not until after they’d made a big show of flattening another two or three villages! To think that they’d go for it right in the middle like this… Well, I do love me a good surprise. Go on then—give us the rest!”

Vlad clapped his hands together. However, his cheery response was an odd one. Even though he was on provisional release, he was still technically a prisoner, and he certainly didn’t have the authority to be giving orders.

However, he had given them so brazenly that the official was at something of a loss. He darted his gaze to and fro, not sure what to do. Eventually, Izabella freed him from his plight by gesturing for him to go on.

The official straightened his posture, then bowed.

“Thank you, ma’am. Then by your leave.”

“Go on.”

“The addendum goes as such. ‘You people lived lives of arrogant bliss, never once sparing a thought for the destitute and the needy. Your deeds were as haughty as they were heinous. As such, the lot falls on us to lop off your sinful heads. It falls on us to spill rivers of your blood, stack mountains of your corpses, and reduce you all to ash. For us, our victory lies in *slaying as many of you as we can* until the day of our ultimate defeat. However, if it’s clemency you would ask of us…’”

Suddenly, the flowing narration came to an abrupt halt. The official began coughing.

It would seem that the smoky air was starting to get to him.

Vlad slumped his shoulders in contemptuous exasperation, an act that earned him a sharp glare from Izabella. Seeing that, Jeanne just barely managed to stop herself from shrugging as well. She quickly righted her drooping posture.

As all of that was going on, Elisabeth surreptitiously frowned. Something had caught her attention.

It was the civil official. As he coughed, he was glancing in her direction, asking her with his gaze if it was really all right for him to read the rest aloud.

Is the information dangerous to me in some way? But if so, why bother warning me? Wait…

Suddenly, Elisabeth remembered something—she knew him. That in and of itself was odd, given that she had little interest in any of the civil officials or their business, nor did she even know the man’s name.

However, there was a good reason she recognized him.

It was from when they took her verbal testimony when compiling records on Kaito Sena.

Out of all the people there, he was the only one who’d had the decency to so much as offer her a cup of honey tea.

Afterward, he told her that his brother was one of the paladins who fought in Ragnarok. Then he went on.

"'The Mad King's the only reason any of us made it out of there,' my brother kept telling me. 'If it weren't for him, we would've all just died.' The way I see it, it's our job as survivors to pay our respects to the person the Mad King was fighting to save… Even if that person is the Torture Princess."

That was undoubtably what was causing him to falter. He was afraid that giving his report would be doing wrong by her.

Upon realizing that, Elisabeth returned the man's gaze with a sharp one of her own. "Out with it already," she urged him.

I've no need for compassion from a softhearted fool. And besides, the die's already been cast.

His silence would do nothing to improve the situation. They could close their eyes and stuff their ears all they liked, but the tragedy would unfold all the same.

Fleeing was no longer an option.

Not for anyone.

Certainly not for the Torture Princess.

And as such, their only choice was to fight back.

The civil official gulped at Elisabeth's stern glare. Then he spoke with renewed solemnity.

"Forgive me… Now, it continues with the rebels' demands. Shall I read them out?"

"Aye, tell us what it is they want."

This time, Elisabeth urged him on out loud. He nodded and steadied his breathing.

Then he gave them the rest in one go.

"'If you would have us put a halt to your judgment, then we require compensation. A victim. A sacrifice. If you want us to spare you, then give us the Mad King and his bride in their crystal—as well as the Torture Princess Elisabeth Le Fanu.'"

There was a perceptible shift in the air. Everyone present gasped in unison.

Izabella squeezed her forehead. Jeanne shrugged. And Vlad let out a small chuckle.

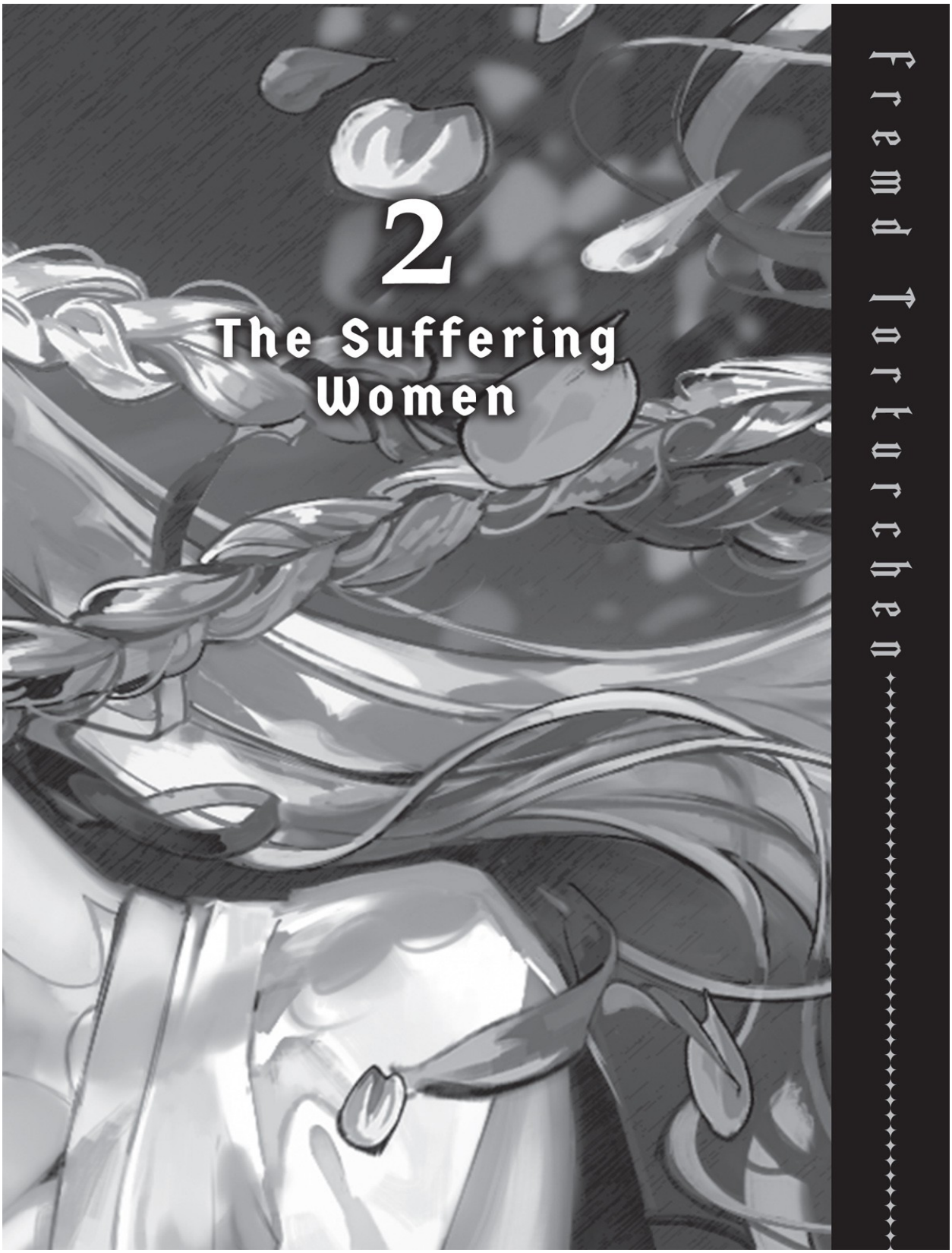
Elisabeth, however, was silent. Their demand fell within her expectations. It was hardly worth getting worked up about.

Though, that said…

…she was also acutely aware of what would happen next.

Soon, the masses would become her greatest foe.

That was the true threat lurking within those words.


2
The Suffering Women
Fremd Torturchen

2
The Suffering Women

The room was red.

It was dyed all over with the color of fresh blood, and it was the kind of scene that burrowed into your eyeballs and chipped away at your brain. However, the room itself was constructed in a normal manner. Firewood was stacked beside its hearth, and it had a cupboard decorated with ornaments.

A chessboard sat atop its plain, well-built desk.

Of all the room's minor sundries, it was the only one that stood out.

For one, it had far too many pieces. Given the size of the desk, it shouldn't have been possible for the hundreds and thousands of them to all fit, but fit they did. There was clearly something odd about the board's width.

And for another, each and every one of the pieces was intricately crafted.

The knights were armed with swords, the bishops held their staves high, and the king was adorned with a proper crown. However, the pawns were all empty-handed.

That in and of itself was yet another of the board's oddities. After all, what could be stranger than unarmed soldiers? But that was just the thing. The pawns represented the greatest force on the board, but although they resembled soldiers at first glance, they were actually something else entirely.

In truth, they were the powerless masses.

The vast majority of them had no ability to fight in their own defense the way the knights could.

Even if calamity were to befall them, most of them would have no choice but to wait for the end to come.

Suddenly

a sonorous sound echoed.

The boy had picked up a pawn and tapped it against the board. When he did, the pawn swelled between his fingers, popping and rupturing and transforming into chunks of blood and viscera. Its remains stained a section of the board dark red.

Kaito Sena then spoke, his youthful face somber and grim.

"Izabella and I had a conversation once. I told her that I couldn't save everyone."

“Was that the one you two had the night before Ragnarok, when you came to the Capital to pick me up?”

“Yeah, that’s the one. That was the first time I learned that the mixed-race folk were being massacred.”

Kaito narrowed his eyes. Pureblood humans made up over 80 percent of the Capital’s population, but that hadn’t stopped the tragedy from occurring there. Up in the poverty-stricken north, where mixed-race people were more plentiful and therefore more visible, it went without saying how grim things had gotten.

Especially once you considered how many of the attacks had gone unreported, the incident was bad enough to leave an ugly stain on the annals of history.

That much had been apparent even as it was happening. Kaito’s expression clouded as he went on.

“This is what Izabella was worried about.”

“What is?”

“‘Even if we overcome this challenge, the world is too steeped in malice,’ she told me. ‘With all the animosity and fear the people will bear, I have no faith we’ll be able to keep on living like normal.’ Well, bad news…”

Hina nodded sadly from the seat across from his.

“It would appear that her fears were realized, weren’t they?”

The army facing off against Kaito was splayed out before her. However, she wasn’t the one he was playing against.

In fact, they weren’t even playing chess.

The scene laid out on the board was no game. It was a microcosm of the world.

Either that or perhaps a grim parody made to look like one.

Kaito picked up another piece. Yet again, it swelled up and burst. However, none of that was his doing. The pawns had been bursting all on their own for a while now, and each time they did, the enemy’s ranks swelled by the same number.

The new pieces looked like hideous babies, wet with blood and amniotic fluid.

Demon grandchildren.

They dwelled in the wombs of captured pieces—human beings—and were born by devouring their mothers from the inside out.

Kaito spoke as he watched the detestable process repeat itself again and again.

“You and me, we’re not gods. And for that matter, even God is just a naturally occurring phenomenon around these parts. Nobody has the power to save everyone. And that means…anyone who wants to save as many people as possible needs to know when and where to cut their losses.”

His voice was tinged with anguish.

Such was the unpleasant choice the powerful sometimes found themselves faced with.

Their forces were meager, and the territory to cover was vast. In other words, they could only station their soldiers in a finite number of places.

Because of that, the rebels' raids had forced the three races to make a decision while they searched for the enemy stronghold.

On Vlad's suggestion, they'd identified the areas where the rebels were likely to strike, ranked them in order of strategic importance…

…and abandoned everything below a certain threshold.

The places they deemed unworthy of defending were left with little more than warnings and occasional patrols, and it was exactly such places where the mixed-race forces carried out their slaughter. Coldhearted as the three races' decision had been, though, it had proved fruitful. Ever since the loss of the first and second imperial beastfolk princesses and the saint representative, they'd avoided suffering any more notable deaths. "Of course you did," Vlad had quipped. "How could you get laid low by underhanded tricks when you have the help of the most underhanded man around?"

However, the greatest outcome was, as always, the greatest good for the greatest number.

True dominion of the board lay with those powerless pawns.

In a sense, the masses were like a single sprawling ruler. The things they thought and said had profound effects on the rest of the board.

For how could they not?

"Revenge is impatient. Corpses speak louder than words. Fear warbles. And a fell wind blows. Now, then…"

As he wove his abstract statement, Kaito carefully picked up another piece.

It was a piece modeled in the shape of a slender woman—the sinner, lording over the battlefield with long sword in hand. As always, it had been placed in front of the other pieces, protecting the powerless by squaring off against the grotesque enemy army. Yet despite that, there wasn't the slightest hint of fear on her face.

She was unflinching, valiant, and beautiful.

It was the saddest thing imaginable.

Kaito narrowed his gaze.

"…What's your play, Elisabeth?"

The piece clicked against the board as he placed it back down. Then he snapped his fingers, and the chessboard vanished without a trace.

All that remained
in that red, crimson, scarlet room
was silence.

*

A loud *clap* echoed through the timeworn hall, casually shattering the still silence.

It was followed by the sound of Vlad's overly theatrical voice.

"Now, then! Some silly little questions to sort through what we know!"

The plaster wall he was standing before was adorned with etchings of ivy and grapevines. However, the fine furniture the room should have housed was nowhere to be seen, and the windows were all shuttered up.

The manor itself was lavish, but it was all too evident how long it had been abandoned for. The air inside hung gloomy and stale.

Empty as his stage was, though, Vlad's voice rang as sonorously as ever.

"How much do the masses truly know about the particulars of the reconstruction? On the night they survived the end of days, did the foolish sheep dream of the unvarnished truth? There can be but one answer!"

His heels clicked as he strode forward. Suddenly, though, he wheeled around with an elegant spin.

With his right palm laid atop his chest, Vlad extended his left hand before himself, chewing the scenery for all it was worth.

"*Nay.* Nothing changed. The sheep remained as ignorant as ever, for they had nobody to hand them the fruit from the tree of knowledge. Now, of course, there were a great many things that *did* come to light in the end of days' wake."

He paused for a beat, as though to gauge his audience's reaction. Ignoring Vlad would only make him all the more annoying, Elisabeth knew. Dealing with him required a certain degree of forbearance.

As such, she decided to play along. She gave him a nod as she leaned against the wall.

While she did, she quietly went over her own memories of that time.

The three races forming their joint army. Their valiant battle against the higher entities at the World's End. The noble sacrifice of the mage who called himself the Mad King. Those were the kinds of glorious tales that had been recounted to the masses by none other than the human king himself. However, much of the information on Ragnarok had nobody to tell it but the mage merchants who took part in the battle themselves.

All things considered, it was a fine trick.

Many parts of the story were moving, well worthy of being passed down and told for millennia.

Meanwhile, the less savory information could be quietly hushed up and forgotten.

After all, the existence of Jeanne de Rais, a second Torture Princess, and the fact that Vlad Le Fanu and the Kaiser aided in the three races' struggle were but the tip of the iceberg. The Grave Keeper's true role, where the First Demon had lain, the Saint's malice, the details on how alien and cruel the God pillar was—that information was as dangerous as a poisoned blade or a sulfurous flame.

If any of that had become widely known, it would have dealt a crushing blow to humanity's recovery. At best, it would have led to civil unrest and mass suicides, and at worst, it might have even sparked a war. To prevent

that, those who knew the truth decided to extract the palatable bits alone in order to dress them up and present them to the world.

“As naked men and women hide their unmentionables and mask their faces with makeup. As flowers are pruned, with their rotted stems coldly discarded. Such is the nature of our dilapidated legend.”

What had been left at the end was a tale of love and miracles.

Vlad’s voice flowed through Elisabeth’s ears so eloquently it made her skin crawl. However, she was only half paying attention to him. The rest of her focus was commanded by a quote she’d just remembered, one she’d heard in a dream within a fictitious castle of sand.

It had been spoken by someone who was Vlad yet wasn’t him at all.

“In a sense, we stand at a legend’s end. The space beyond the fairy tale.”

At present, those words were quite literally true.

In order to varnish over the truth, Ragnarok had been glorified in poems, songs, plays, paintings, epics, and novels, and thanks to endorsements from the government and the Church, the people had amused themselves with such art all throughout the reconstruction efforts.

To them, the entire story was *already* nothing more than a fairy tale.

Alas, one can hardly blame them.

From the people’s perspective, the underlings had shown up to attack and devour them out of the blue. As they prayed to the newly manifested God pillar, Diablo had subjected them to calamities untold. And then, without warning, the nightmare had ended just like that.

They were told that a grand battle had taken place behind the scenes, sure, but just hearing about it couldn’t possibly have made it seem real.

To them, the things that had transpired out of their sight were no different from legends and fairy tales.

As far as many are concerned, the Mad King may well have never truly existed.

Long ago, an ordinary woman had been made into the Saint, a being of unsullied beauty and boundless mercy.

And someday, an ordinary boy would be made into the Hero, a wise and powerful being who knew no pain.

With each telling, the sheep would embellish the tale a little further. They wouldn’t mean any harm by it—after all, they were dealing with a figure from legend.

Why *not* make him out to be as legendary as could be?

They knew nothing.

Not a single, solitary thing.

He was no hero. No fairy-tale protagonist. No one to be revered.

He was just a man. Just a boy.

And yet in spite of that, Kaito…

…would remain at the World’s End forevermore.

Vlad continued on, his voice as pompous as ever.

“As such, the masses have no idea the true danger behind the rebels’ demand. In fact, it’d be a problem if they did, no?”

Hearing him brought Elisabeth back to the here and now. She shook her head.

Seemingly unconcerned with his listener’s reaction, Vlad continued his enthused monologue.

“And besides, the Mad King is but a hero from a legend. Even if they learned the truth, the blood and tears they themselves shed would still feel far more vivid, to say nothing of their fear of the pain yet to come. Compared to their own well-being, his well-being would be an afterthought of an afterthought. And what’s more, revenge is impatient. Corpses speak louder than words, fear warbles, and a fell wind blows. To wit…”

“…Disquieting rumors will begin circulating among the people.”

Vlad gave Elisabeth’s reply a nod.

By carrying out the massacres in the way they had, the rebels had set the stage. Then, before sending their demand to the Capital, they’d also prepared a number of familiars and communication devices with the same message and sent them to broadcast it through the air.

All across the land, birds were crying out, eagles were crying out, and crows were crying out.

“If it’s clemency you would ask of us…”

And that had gotten the people talking.

“Did you hear about those villages that got burned down?” “Did you see those corpses with their bellies torn open?” “Did you hear that message that was coming from the sky?” “The attacks are indiscriminate, and they’re still happening.” “But it’s not like we can turn to the king for help.”

And if that’s the case… If that’s the case…

“Precisely, my precious. It won’t be long at all before the people start demanding you be handed over! I warned you, did I not? That those massacres weren’t an act of war but a publicity stunt designed to stir up a fell wind—that is to say, those disquieting rumors. And oh, how their audience responded. Why, they’ll turn out in droves! And you know what that means, I take it.”

“It means *that*.”

Elisabeth let out a sigh. Vlad, seemingly satisfied, concluded his speech with a graceful bow. Electing not to offer him any further response, Elisabeth glanced at the others.

Over by the window, Izabella was squeezing her forehead with her beautiful heterochromatic eyes closed. The whole situation was giving her a headache. An unusual blue ring gleamed on her middle finger.

Beside her, Jeanne was raising and lowering her hands. She clearly wanted to offer Izabella some words of encouragement, but she was anguishing over what exactly to say. Although her intentions were serious, her hand motions made it look like she was performing some sort of pagan ritual.

Although the two of them were both worrying in silence, the room was noisy all the same.

That was thanks to the mob outside, audible even through the closed window.

Loathsome Elisabeth, repulsive Elisabeth!

Cruel, hideous Elisabeth!

"'Tis a chant I've not heard for some time… Why, the nostalgia is getting me all misty-eyed."

Elisabeth thought back to the scene they'd seen outside.

People dressed all in black were marching down the main street. They had looked almost like a funeral procession, which had been accentuated by the fact that they were carrying a set of three coffins. Each one had been stuffed full of flower petals as vivid and crimson as if they'd been packed with human viscera. It was clear they were meant to symbolize the three people the rebels had demanded. The mob's footsteps were heavy, and the constant fear they lived in was visibly weighing on them.

Even now, they were still continuing their hoarse, joyless chant.

Loathsome Elisabeth, repulsive Elisabeth!

Cruel, hideous Elisabeth!

It was like they were reciting a fearful, hate-filled curse.

Either that or perhaps a nursery rhyme.

*

"Well, at least they're being reasonable enough not to wave axes and torches around," Vlad remarked. "But still, this is just the Capital we're talking about. The poverty-stricken north is another beast altogether. After all, there are plenty of people up there who are *no strangers to carrying pitchforks*." He wrapped his point up with a pleased-sounding murmur. "Who knows just how bad things will get from here?"

Elisabeth took a moment to listen to the tumult, basking in the familiar cries of hatred. A little while later, she shook her head and gave Vlad his orders in a sharp tone.

"…Vlad."

"Yes?"

"Change it back."

Vlad responded with an elegant bow, as though to say, *Your wish is my command*. With a snap of his fingers, azure flower petals and thick darkness swirled through the room like a whirlwind.

Then everything in view began to crumble.

The room they were in was changing from the ruin into somewhere else entirely.

Scaly cracks spread across the plaster walls as the ceiling splintered into cubes and the windows broke into bricks. And not only was the room

fragmenting, it was being peeled away like wallpaper. Its chunks fluttered through the air one after another.

As they did, they too gradually transformed into azure flower petals.

The polished floorboards disappeared as well, slowly but surely overwritten with a seamless swath of living wood.

As the dimly glowing azure fragments drifted through the air like dead butterflies, they collectively burst into flame.

Then the flame vanished, leaving not even ash in its wake.

At the end of it all, they were in a completely different room than the one they'd been in before.

It was strangely smooth and composed entirely of white wood.

The floor and ceiling weren't parallel but gently sloping, and the walls were curved as well. There were no seams anywhere. It didn't look man-made, and in fact, it wasn't. The entire room had been set up in the hollow of a massive tree. And in all the three races' territories, there was only one tree large enough in which to pull off such a feat.

In short, Elisabeth and Vlad were in the home of the Three Kings of the Forest, one of the sacred places in the beastfolk lands.

The World Tree.

Neither Izabella nor Jeanne was present. The two of them had been stripped away at the same time as the old ruin had been. Just like the contents of the previous room, the two of them weren't actually present in the World Tree.

Elisabeth gave the transformed room another glance over.

"One does wonder, by the way, why you felt it necessary to project an image of that ruin in the Capital across this entire room as you spoke. Are you truly that fond of idly squandering your mana?"

"Ha-ha! Come now, precious daughter of mine—what's the harm? Why, at the moment, our entire world sits atop a farcical stage! And what better way to celebrate that fact than with theatrics? We're here—might as well make the most of it."

Vlad laughed as innocently as a child. Elisabeth gave him a disdainful sigh.

The peeled-away scenery—the abandoned room with blocked-off windows—was the image that Izabella's magic ring was "perceiving." By projecting that image, Vlad had made it appear as though their room in the World Tree had transformed into the one in the Capital. However, doing so had been a meaningless act bereft of any real purpose.

Vlad had merely done it to amuse himself.

Izabella and Jeanne, on the other hand, were stationed in the ruin for real. They needed to be able to deal with things if the mob got out of hand.

However, diplomacy hardly fell in Vlad or the Torture Princess's wheelhouse, so they decided to relocate to the World Tree. At present, they were standing by and waiting to serve as Maclaeus Filliana's guards once he got out of the three-race meeting that was currently going on.

They also had another important reason for being there, but they hadn't been informed of any progress on that particular front. Unable to rein in his boredom, Vlad had transformed their room and launched into a monologue under the pretense of sorting through the information they had at their disposal. As an aside, he was the one who'd adorned Izabella with her ring, and Jeanne had made a big fuss about refusing to let him put it on her ring finger when he did so.

Elisabeth let out a third sigh.

Everywhere she turned, she was surrounded by people with petty agendas. What a pain.

"Jeanne's bellyaching was annoying, granted, but I supposed it didn't grate on ears nearly as badly as the march at the Capital did. To them, Kaito Sena is a hero, a character from a fairy tale, so they've been reluctant to lambaste him quite the way they do me. No matter, though. They can chant *my* name till their tongues grow numb, for all I care. At the end of the day, though, I doubt it shall stop them from trying to offer all three of us up."

Elisabeth shook her head from side to side. There was nothing to be done about it.

Ever since the end of days, the suicide rate had doubled. People were killing themselves from being overwhelmed with despair, and the atmosphere of fear and sorrow was still just as pronounced as it had been back then. After the demons and the end of days, it was only natural that some people would seek refuge in death rather than endure a third such calamity.

Elisabeth nodded deeply.

The mob was making an understandable decision. An *understandable*, *irredeemable*, and *utterly asinine* decision.

"Dullards, the lot of them. They think they can outmaneuver their foes without even understanding the basic situation they're in? Simply relinquishing something when told to hand it over is naught but folly and intellectual sloth. They can flee punishment for their crimes, aye, but all they will find is another brand of pain waiting just around the corner."

"Oh, I agree wholeheartedly, my precious. Hope is a thing more brittle than glass. You only ever give it to people so you can crush it later—and oh, how sublime it is to watch that light fade from their eyes."

Vlad smiled sweetly. Not only was his remark in poor taste, but it also applied to the wrong side of their particular conflict.

Elisabeth decided to start ignoring him again, and as she did, she realized something.

…Hope, eh? 'Tis much the same arrangement as the Mixed-Race Massacre. How ironic.

During the end of days, the devout killed those of mixed race in hopes that it would lead to their salvation, and now the stupid sheep were trying to offer up yet another sacrifice. It was an act with no creed behind it, no devotion.

It was just an intense, desperate scream—*I don't want to die*.

I don't want to die

So you should die instead

You should die in my place

Someone other than me should die.

It was all so irrational it defied belief. However, fear of death was a powerful enough motivator to render morality impotent.

Who could cast judgment on a man who pushed another off a raft to save himself?

With the avengers preceding over the trial, however, there could only ever be one verdict.

"Why's it wrong to do unto others as I had done unto me?"

"…What a pain they all are. And how utterly vexing."

Sighing yet again, Elisabeth leaned forward from the wall. Her black hair fluttered around her as she strode forward and made for the room's sole door.

Vlad called out from behind her.

"Oh my, you're leaving? When you haven't even been called for yet?"

"Ha, 'tis odd in and of itself it would take them so long. 'Twould be faster if I simply went there myself, no?"

"True enough. I can't say I don't have concerns about your ability to resolve things peacefully, mind you… Come now, my precious. Firing off stakes without so much as turning around? Why, if it wasn't me you were dealing with, you might well have killed someone there."

A stake had appeared out of nowhere and come hurtling toward him, but Vlad snatched it out of the air with ease. He squeezed his slender fingers together.

Cracks ran across the length of the hard stake, and it soon shattered and dissolved into crimson flower petals. Vlad grabbed one of them out of the air and raised it to his lips. Even without stopping or turning around, Elisabeth could tell full well what had happened.

Still facing forward, she gave him a light wave.

"Worry not—I launched that with every intention of it being lethal. Go on and let it run you through for all I care."

"Goodness gracious. Your brutality is beautiful enough to be worthy of admiration, but you really ought to tone down the rudeness. It makes me want to have words with your parents, but I suppose now that would just entail talking to myself… Oh, come now!"

"Louisette."

Elisabeth whirled back as though performing a pirouette.

She then lashed out, launching a blade at him as though drawing a sword from its scabbard at point-blank range. Vlad blocked it with his palm, but even so, it gouged deep into his flesh and cast a magnificent spray of blood through the air. The Torture Princess had nearly cleaved his hand in two.

Elisabeth gave Vlad a steely, crimson glare.

"You're no father of mine. Hold your tongue unless you wish to see it sewn to your jawbone."

The message was clear—that would be his last warning.

Vlad shrugged, rivulets of blood gushing from his hand as he casually plucked the blade out. His arm sagged lifelessly to his side. A few drops of blood had landed on his cheek, and he licked them off with great fervor.

For some reason, his newly reddened lips were curled into a smile. However, it was different from his usual sinister smirk.

It was the sort of expression a parent wore when admiring their child.

Elisabeth scoffed, then set off once more. She strode quickly toward the door and reached for the handle.

Behind her, Vlad spoke through a mouthful of blood.

"Ta-ta. Oh, and do give my best to the Suffering Woman."

Elisabeth opened the door, then headed into the hallway alone and slammed it shut behind her.

She was off to see a proud, solitary woman who bore a heavy burden.

*

Normally, the *Suffering Woman* was a term that referred to the Saint. However, the Saint wasn't in the World Tree at the moment.

In fact, her current whereabouts were a mystery.

After her chance encounter with the Mad King, she had gone missing.

The current Church and reconstruction sect alike had devoted no small amount of effort toward trying to find her but had come up empty-handed time and again. As long as she wanted nothing to do with the world, finding her would be impossible. She may have long since lost the boundless fonts of mana that were God and Diablo, but that didn't change the fact that her magical prowess was as yet unequaled.

As far as the world was concerned, though, her decision was a rather fortunate one.

After all, there were no shortage of things she knew that could easily set off society's current powder keg.

With the exception of the Church, most powerful mages shared the sentiment.

She should go live somewhere else, and someday, she should die there.

Just so long as it isn't here.

As such, the "Suffering Woman" Vlad had referred to wasn't the Saint.

But if she wasn't the Saint

then who was she?

Elisabeth headed deeper and deeper into the World Tree's interior. The farther down she went, the fewer people she passed by.

Eventually, she made her way to the very bottom of a spiral-shaped stairwell and made her way to the left. She was told that the path before

her had once been blocked by tough roots, but at the moment, it was wide open.

A pair of guards, one human and one beastfolk, were standing watch by the entrance. Ever since the demi-humans' betrayal, they'd been excluded from such roles. Both guards were clearly exhausted, and Elisabeth's arrival caused them to become visibly alarmed.

The eagle-headed soldier nervously spoke up.

"Forgive me, Madam Elisabeth, but I don't believe we've called for you yet. Even as captain of our late Lady Valisisa Ula Forstlast's Peace Brigade, I'm afraid I cannot let you through."

"'Tis taking too long, and I've grown weary of waiting. Stand down."

"…I understand how you feel. However, there's a danger this could give rise to a serious interracial issue, so I must ask that you—"

"Oh, enough with the blathering. As I'm sure you're aware, *we've long since passed that point*."

Elisabeth looked to the side, focusing her bloodred eyes on the beastfolk man. He gulped. Even with his tail curled up into a ball, though, he was clearly about to continue making his diligent plea.

Elisabeth chose to beat him to the punch.

"I shan't kill her."

She knew, as did they, that her word would be sufficient for now. The time to carefully consider what to do with the prisoner they were guarding had long since passed them by.

Now it was time to let the Torture Princess do her work.

The two soldiers looked at each other, then silently stood aside.

"Much obliged."

With that, Elisabeth took off down the straight path. The entire corridor was made of unseasoned wood so white it threatened to throw her sense of time out of whack. Eventually, at its end, a boy wearing a scarlet outfit came into view.

It was La Christoph's attendant. With his master now dead, he was serving in a similar function to the one he had before.

Elisabeth stopped in front of him. He looked up at her, then abruptly spoke.

"You…remind me of him."

"Hmm? What's this now? Who is it I remind you of?"

Elisabeth frowned at the sudden assertion. Those in the boy's role normally placed great value on silence, so she hadn't expected him to speak up like that. He continued on in a faltering murmur.

"You remind me of the Mad King… So tense and so sad. My master… La Christoph was the same way. People who bear such burdens seem so sad, each and every one of them."

After hoarsely inflecting the end of his statement, the boy went quiet again. Elisabeth wasn't sure how to respond. There were any number of truths she could offer him, but each one seemed a mistake to voice aloud.

In the end, she decided to act as if she hadn't heard anything.

As for the boy, it would seem that his comment had been nothing more than a slip of the tongue, likely from the shock of having lost his master. He stepped to the side without waiting for the Torture Princess's response.

When he did, the door carved with the Three Kings of the Forest's coat of arms came into view.

Elisabeth pressed her finger against its engraved surface.

When she pushed, the door readily swung open.

Just like the corridor, the room within was completely white. A heavy silence rose up to greet her. The Mad King's window had long since vanished, and the only furniture within was a modest bed. It was like a hospital or perhaps a prison.

Atop the bed's clean sheets

sat a thin woman.

She must have been able to hear the door opening, but she sat motionlessly, her gaze fixed on the wall. She was staring at a single point, as if there was genuinely something there.

Elisabeth spoke.

"Now, I hear you've been adamant in your refusal to be questioned. I must ask, are you feeling all right?"

Even she was surprised at how gentle her own voice came out. And the woman must have known that her question was free of sarcasm.

However, that wasn't to say she didn't take it as a death sentence.

She slowly turned around.

Golden light burned in her reptilian eyes.

"I have been much better, but I have also been much worse, Torture Princess."

"Well, that's good to hear, Suffering Woman."

Aguina Elephabred's wife?

Thus began a meeting between two women

both of whom bore terrible burdens

and each of whom was held dear by an enemy of the world.

The Saint's Final Message

I heard voices. Countless sobs and screams coming from beyond the Mad King's window.

I doubt I will ever forget them.

He left, and a short while later, I did as well.

For I realized something—this world is better off without me.

If I remained, mankind's recovery would have taken yet another errant turn.

How utterly foolish. In the end, the foolish sheep had learned nothing.

They remained ignorant still.

Never once trying to learn the things that truly mattered.

But it's as I once said.

I didn't want to hear their laughter—

—but I didn't want to hear their screams, either.

The Mad King once told me something.

"Every living creature is ignorant, every living creature is like a stupid animal, and every living creature is precious," he said. "That's what makes them worth protecting."

And he was right. Flocks of sheep are stupid and weak.

That's why someone has to protect them.

Bearing that all-encompassing burden is a sad, lonely affair.

But even so, the places they loved will still be there, and they will still have had people who loved them.

I've also been thinking about atonement.

And about the person who once loved me. I've been thinking about him a lot.

If the sheep were ignorant and stupid, then so too was I. That was why I went into hiding.

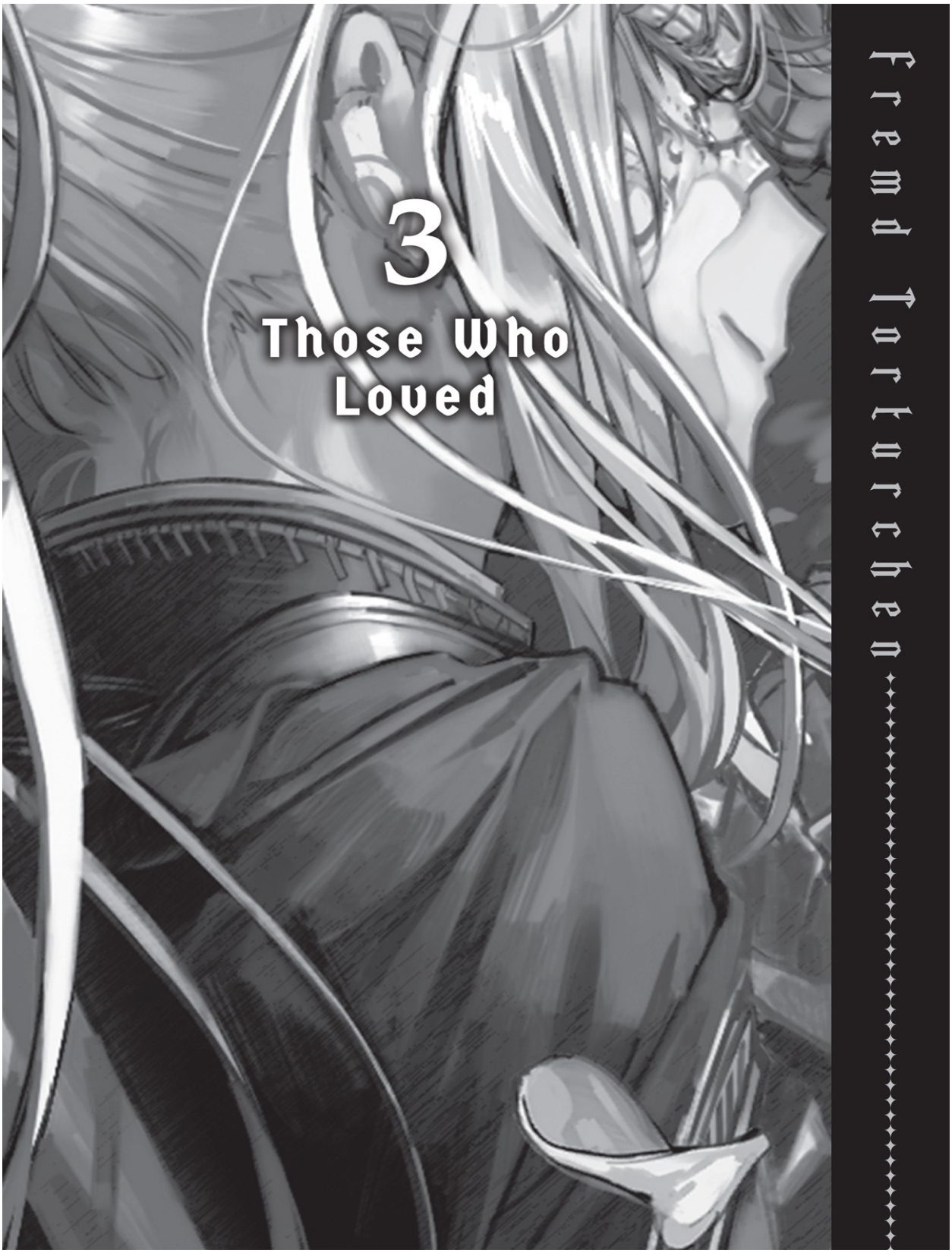
It wasn't just so I could disappear.

It was because I had things I needed to learn and things I needed to do.

So I hope we meet again someday.

Someday.

Before the end of everything.


3
Those Who
Loved

3
Those Who Loved

The room was red.

It was dyed all over with the color of fresh blood, and it was the kind of room that burrowed its way into your eyeballs and chipped away at your brain.

A chessboard sat atop its plain desk.

Of its pieces, several were wriggling and squirming in a most peculiar way.

Not only was the horrible process of death and birth from before continuing to take place, several groups of pawns were also beginning to march. In the remote corners of the board, some of them were even rioting. However, there were also two pieces holding the board in check.

Each belonged to a different side, and the two were standing face-to-face.

Both were women. One's head was human; the other had the head of a lizard.

Kaito and Hina watched the two pieces intently. However, neither of the women moved. They merely began having a conversation. However, the pieces' voices weren't audible from down on the board. And Kaito and Hina both knew that.

The pieces appeared close to them, but they were actually farther away than the World's End.

Trying to hear them was a fool's errand.

Yet even so, Kaito and Hina continued straining their ears.

The two of them were silent. And the room was silent as well.

Totally
utterly
silent.

*

"You say that I'm suffering, but…the term suits you better than it does me, don't you think?"

Aguina's wife's voice was gentle. Elisabeth narrowed her gaze.

It was difficult to tell a demi-human's age at a glance, but even so, the woman was clearly no spring chicken. Each and every one of her vermilion scales gleamed in the light, but several of them had grown much harder than they normally should have. It resembled the change that the Sand Queen's corpse had undergone.

That was proof that her blood was exceptionally pure, even among the highest-grade pureblood demi-humans.

After committing his betrayal, Aguina had left her completely in the dark. But despite her lack of involvement, she still refused to be questioned. However, forcing her to testify wasn't exactly an option.

The thing was, her pedigree and status were even higher than her husband's.

In short, she was a blue blood the likes of which were rare even for demi-human nobility.

Despite the woman's position, though, Elisabeth made no efforts this time to hold her sarcasm in check.

"Nay, I relinquish it to you without reservations. Your husband betrayed the beastfolk and humans and sided with the mixed-race people. Now he is an enemy of the world. All for the sake of a reckless, ill-conceived gamble. His obsession with blood purity blinded him to the idiocy of his own plan."

"Insolent words coming from a lowly human like yourself."

The lizard-headed woman's voice was gentle and calm.

So much so, in fact, it took a moment for Elisabeth to register what she'd said.

Such was the depth of the soft dignity her words exuded.

Aguina's wife then continued, never once losing the characteristic elegance of one who stood above others.

"For surely you're aware, Torture Princess—weapon of the Church, pitiful sinner, and consort of the Mad King that you are."

"…Hmm? I've some objections I'd like to voice. But go on."

"How humanity is a group of exclusionary elitists unable to see just how deeply human-centric their worldviews are. And what's more, you're as numerous as rats. In time, you will eradicate the other races, whether they took part in the rebellion or not. Knowing that, he chose to save the hostages. To prioritize blood purity so that our race might be saved. For a human, of all people, to deride that decision as 'idiocy' is an act worthy of contempt."

The demi-human woman smiled. Her tone was as warm as a hand gently stroking one's head and as biting as a knife to the gut. She narrowed her golden eyes and spoke with her head held high.

"That's right—I take great pride in what my husband did."

And with that description of her husband, the enemy of the world, she brought her speech to a close.

That was all she had to say.

That and nothing more.

She turned away from Elisabeth once more. Elisabeth shook her head, her expression quietly changing.

Suddenly, the Torture Princess spoke.

"See, I can scarce think of anything further beneath my interest."

"—!"

Elisabeth was well aware how careless her statement was. It was the height of impropriety.

Aguina's wife turned back toward her.

When she did, Elisabeth reached out, grabbing the woman by her scaly throat before she had so much as a chance to scream.

It was only a light pressure. She didn't squeeze down.

Instead, though, she deployed a wave of flower petals in a circle around them. Aguina's wife's eyes went wide.

The demi-humans were no experts in magic, but even she knew.

She knew that the Torture Princess was a sinner clad in flower petals, a wielder of blood and chains.

To her, severing an artery or lopping off a head would be child's play.

Still pressing on the demi-human woman's vitals, Elisabeth nodded.

"Your fear and concern are valid. The end of days and the rebellion both had their roots in human religious fanaticism. But your people were just as exclusionary toward those of mixed race. You refused to shelter them. Everyone believed that justice lay solely on their side, and the mess we're now in is the result of that."

"You—"

"Standing by and watching is a sin in and of itself. However, I shall admit that mankind is entirely unworthy of trust."

"Oh, then we are in agreement there. So why not—?"

"But that, too, is of little import."

Elisabeth smiled amiably, and for the first time, Aguina's wife's expression froze. It was hard to say if her intuition was sharp or dull, but in either case, she'd finally realized something.

She had realized just how utterly furious the Torture Princess was.

Her expression still as mild as could be, Elisabeth spoke with firm conviction.

"*I* take great pride in what *Kaito Sena* did."

Aguina's wife gave her a confused look. His was a name that was completely unrelated to what they were talking about. To Elisabeth, however, nothing could possibly have been more important. After all, the basis for her sense of justice had long since transcended such pedestrian concepts as morality and logic.

"I mean, has it ever even crossed your mind?"

"Has…what?"

"Who was it that fought for this world? Who was it that rescued all the stupid sheep? Who was it that sacrificed himself to make all that possible? Was it your husband? No. Of course not. You and all the others…*you're full of it*, you know that?"

Elisabeth's rage caused her fingertips to tremble ever so slightly. However, she didn't squeeze down with the hand itself.

Taking great care not to wound Aguina's wife, the Torture Princess went on.

“You, your husband, your people’s obsession with blood purity, the mixed-race people’s lament, the three races’ various designs…to me, such things are worth less than nothing. I have but one intention—to save this world, and as many of the mindless fools who live in it as possible, by whatever methods I can muster.”

“…That’s a very contradictory ideology, is it not?”

“Oh, it is—make no mistake. But you see, there was once a person who saw the world’s hideous face and accepted it for what it was. And so I must do the same—for I take great pride in that fool, and I love him from the bottom of my heart.”

The words cascaded from her mouth, one after another.

Elisabeth cocked her head to the side. *Hmm?* She pondered for a moment, ruminating on what she had just said. And in the end, she arrived at a quiet realization.

It was true.

It was as one would their confidante, or their brother, or their savior.

As one would a kind, incorrigible fool—

As one would any whom they ought to love—

“I, Elisabeth Le Fanu, love Kaito Sena.”

In that moment, a warm tear slid down Elisabeth’s cheek. However, she ignored it.

For such a thing

was completely and utterly unbefitting the Torture Princess.

*

“Now, speak.”

Elisabeth gave her order as though nothing had happened.

The noblewoman looked at her with her golden eyes.

Of all the demi-humans who’d remained, she was the sole one who’d persisted in refusing to testify. The Torture Princess spoke dispassionately as she faced her.

“Wife of Aguina Elephabred. If your love compels you to remain silent, then so be it. For the sake of my love, I shall flay the truth out of you.”

“…You would threaten me, knowing who I am?”

“Aye, ’twould be inexcusable, torturing a pureblood demi-human noble from a distinguished family. But do you really think your status will save you? Knowing who *I* am? Shouldering such sins is precisely the role the Torture Princess plays.”

As promised, she wasn’t going to kill her. But that didn’t mean she wasn’t going to break her.

A malevolent smile spread across the Torture Princess’s lips. As the crimson petals whirled around the two women, Elisabeth presented Aguina with the sole means of escape.

“But if you’ve anything you wish to tell me before that, then by all means, be my guest.”

“Such insolence.”

A hard, flat sound rang out. Aguina’s wife had swatted Elisabeth’s hand aside.

When she did, the petals sliced shallow cuts into her fingers, but the Torture Princess intentionally yielded to her weak resistance. She dismissed the remainder of the petals, then withdrew her hand from the noblewoman’s scaly throat and silently stood by.

After steadying her breathing, Aguina’s wife did an impressive job swallowing her fear.

“There is one thing I would like to tell you.”

“You have my attention.”

“I am fully confident that a single broken pinkie would be enough to get me to talk.”

“I’m…not sure why you sound so proud of that.”

Elisabeth squinted at the woman. Half the things she said seemed to be practically begging for pithy rebuttals. For some reason, though, Aguina’s wife was the one who sighed. She then straightened her posture, elegantly pressing her fingertips together to stop the bleeding.

Now facing the Torture Princess head-on, the demi-human noblewoman spoke.

“Elisabeth Le Fanu… You claimed to be one who knows love, did you not?”

Elisabeth tilted her head, not sure what to make of the question. In an instant, the golden eyes of the wife and mother standing before her took on a newly serious glint. She faced the Torture Princess, brazen and bold.

“Those who boast of knowing love cannot well make light of the love of others. Such is the oath I demand of you. I am well aware that my husband’s crimes are beyond pardon. But when you find my son and his wife, I ask that you vow not to forsake them.”

“You… Rather than submitting to torture, you would choose to negotiate? What—is this your pride as a pureblood speaking?”

“No, my love as a mother. I cannot…will not allow harm to come to them.”

The woman murmured, “Surely you understand.” Elisabeth gave the matter some consideration. It was no small demand. In fact, depending on how things were unfolding in the pureblood settlement, protecting the woman’s family might well prove impossible. Aguina’s wife went on.

“The whereabouts of the pureblood settlement in the Dragons’ Graveyard—the one found by the rebels, where my firstborn and his wife live—were hidden even from me. And the merchants the rebels used to track it down, as well as their supply routes, have doubtless been wiped out. Their lives and records lost to the rebels… As such, finding the settlement amid the vast desert will be challenging at best, to say nothing of the short time frame you’re working under. And given how difficult it would be to hold the settlement otherwise, I think it’s safe to assume that you’ll find large numbers of mixed-race people lying there in wait. Well? Wouldn’t you agree?”

“…Aye, true enough. ’Tis imperative we get eyes on it posthaste. Still, though… Here I had thought you a dullard, but you’re a sharp one indeed. Why, I would hardly take you for a noble at all.”

“You know, my husband said that was what made him fall for me. Speaking of which, he told me something when he left for the palace. Not the location but something akin to it.”

Aguina’s wife calmly looked up at Elisabeth. Her gaze was downright enticing. Her insinuation was clear, and her hook was cast. She laid her palm atop her chest.

“What will it be, Elisabeth Le Fanu? Will you accept my offer, or will you torture me until my blood and secrets run freely from my mouth?”

Her voice was calm and dignified, and it rang thick with determination. Even now, she was still searching for a respectable option. Either way, her path would be a thorny one, but she had steeled her resolve and, if need be, was prepared to commit a betrayal of her own.

Elisabeth gave a brief nod. Even as the Torture Princess, she knew.

When one option carried the danger of sparking interracial tensions, the other was obviously sounder.

“I cannot offer you any firm promises, as protection is hardly my forte. But if our assumption does end up holding true…then I shall devote whatever resources I can to ensuring their survival. Will that do?”

“That is acceptable. Given my current position, negotiating better terms than that is beyond me. But know this—you shall hear this information from my lips but once. For your sake, I hope you can glean meaning from it.”

The pride possessed by pureblood demi-humans was difficult to overstate.

In one sense, it was insipid, and in another, regal.

Steadfastly maintaining her dignity to the bitter end, Aguina’s wife spoke.

“The way things are going, war may be inevitable. I have no intention of letting the calamity affect you or our people, but if you feel that you’re in

danger, gather the rest of the purest bloods and turn to the Sand Queen. She will lead you to us and our son.' That is the totality of what my husband told me."

"'Turn to the Sand Queen'… Meaning her corpse?"

"Such irreverence. In our land, you would be executed for a comment like that."

Elisabeth ignored Aguina's wife's admonishment. The Torture Princess frowned. Aguina may have been obsessed with blood purity, but he was also a pragmatist through and through.

Whatever he was getting at, it must have been something that would actually work.

Are the settlement's coordinates recorded on the Sand Queen's corpse somehow? No…just telling the purebloods where it is would be insufficient, given that they'd still need to cross the desert afterward. Some sort of teleportation mechanism installed in the corpse, then? Nothing happened when we blew it up, though…

As Elisabeth sank into thought, she looked up. Aguina's wife was staring at her, almost as though trying to figure her out. Their negotiations were complete. Elisabeth gave her a wave to set her mind at ease.

"…That concludes my boorish task, so I shall be out of your hair now. Forgive the intrusion, wife of Aguina."

"Satisbarina."

"Hmm?"

Elisabeth cocked her head. From her human perspective, the word sounded almost like a tongue twister. Aguina's wife laid her wounded fingers atop her mouth and let out a sigh.

"I see you're a little slow. It's my name—Satisbarina Elephabred. I am not 'Suffering Woman,' nor am I 'wife of Aguina.' We have made an oath, you and I, and as such, I expect you to remember that."

"Ah, I see… Then, Satisbarina, I have something I would tell you in turn."

"By all means, speak your piece."

Satisbarina gracefully offered Elisabeth the floor. Elisabeth crossed her arms. She hadn't minded most of the accusations Satisbarina leveled her way, but there was one thing she couldn't let stand uncorrected.

"'Tis as you said—I am the Torture Princess, a weapon of the Church, and a sinner. But I've no need of your pity, and moreover, I am no consort of the Mad King's. He is a married man and a devoted one at that."

"Oh, goodness me, I had no idea. My deepest apologies; I see I've touched on a painful subject."

Satisbarina covered her mouth, not sure what to say. However, there was nothing that needed saying. Elisabeth got the sense that a new misunderstanding had taken the old one's place, but she turned around after deciding to leave things at that. A thought crossed her mind.

'Tis but a tale from long, long ago.

Once upon a time, there was a boy who was brutally killed by another and a monster who brutally killed others.

Or perhaps there was a child who was abandoned by his parents and a sinner who was abandoned by the world.

By now, there was nobody left who knew how they had spent their days. But the sinner was fine with that.

The two of them used to be together.

That was enough for her.

“Fare thee well, Satisbarina Elephabred.”

“And likewise to you, Torture Princess Elisabeth Le Fanu.”

Thus spoke the Suffering Women

those who loved the enemies of the world

as though vowing never to meet in that room again.

And with that, they parted, much in the manner that friends did.

*

Elisabeth exited the room, passing by the gatekeeper boy as she left.

He silently stepped back and resumed his post.

As he did, Elisabeth strode down the white corridor. With each wordless step she took, her thoughts turned and turned.

…After La Christoph’s death, I sent a familiar to the demi-human palace and discovered that the rebel troops had thinned out. I retook the area Alice and Lewis vanished from, but…most of the rebels were gone, and they took the demi-humans and demon grandchildren with them.

Satisbarina’s assessment of the situation had been on the mark. They still hadn’t found the rebels’ stronghold, but even though there was no guarantee that the pureblood settlement was where they were holed up, the sheer lengths to which it had been concealed brought that to the forefront of Elisabeth’s mind.

She needed to reexamine the Sand Queen.

Right when she reached that conclusion, though, her train of thought was interrupted.

“Madam Elisabeeeeeeth!”

“Ah! Y-you surprised me… Lute, is that you? For a moment, I half thought you the Butcher, back from the dead. So what is it? For you to come all this way down… Did something happen?”

Elisabeth blinked repeatedly as she stared at the wolf-headed beastman who had just rushed up before her. It was Lute, vice-captain of the Peace Brigade and Elisabeth’s direct subordinate.

His tongue was longer than a human’s, and it hung from his mouth as he panted to catch his breath. All his coppery fur was standing on end, his tail was puffed up and sticking straight out, and to top it all off, his ears were twitching up a storm.

It was all too plain to see that something was up.

Had there been another attack? Had the masses gotten even more out of control? Both perhaps?

Elisabeth narrowed her eyes as she considered the possibilities. However, she could tell that none of them were it. Lute was shaking his head indecisively, his gaze wandering and his nose twitching. Then finally, he raised his voice.

“Ah, to hell with it! I’m the first member of the Peace Brigade, and moreover, a sworn friend of Sir Kaito Sena’s! For the greater good or not, I cannot sit by silently and watch this happen!”

“Kaito Sena? What, did something happen to Kaito?”

If so, that was a whole different story altogether, and his alarm was well warranted. Elisabeth took a step forward as she spoke.

For some reason, seeing his captain’s reaction seemed to help cool Lute’s head. He straightened his posture and gave his report.

“In the tripartite conference I was just attending as a guard, the discussion turned to the crowds protesting across the land. Things have settled down in the Capital, but the people in outlying areas are rioting. Casualties are already starting to occur, and there’s concern that the rebels will use it as an opportunity to attack. And so the conference reached a decision.”

Lute took a deep breath. Before he could finish, though, Elisabeth sensed what he was about to say.

She hoped against hope that her prediction was off the mark, but his next words served to squash that possibility.

“Handing the vessel of God and Diablo over to the rebels is off the table. Instead…”

Before the masses had a chance to become completely uncontrollable

they would destroy the crystal, with Sir Kaito Sena in it.

“I see. A prudent measure.”

Elisabeth delivered her succinct response in the quietest of murmurs. Her tepid reaction almost earned her a dismayed howl from Lute. *You’re* okay *with this?!* he seemed to be on the verge of shouting. But he took a single look at her face, and that was enough to drive him silent.

Elisabeth had no idea what her own expression looked like, and in truth, she didn’t much care. She just slowly closed her eyes.

For Elisabeth Le Fanu knew.

It was as one would their confidante, or their brother, or their savior.

As one would a kind, incorrigible fool—

As one would any whom they ought to love—

Elisabeth Le Fanu loved Kaito Sena.

And so if the world was going to betray him—

—then she had no choice but to betray the world.

Excerpt from the introduction to *Records of the Torture Princess*

This is a tale from long, long ago.

Once upon a time, there was a boy who was brutally killed by another and a monster who brutally killed others.

Or perhaps there was a child who was abandoned by his parents and a sinner who was abandoned by the world.

By now, there was nobody left who knew how they had spent their days.

In truth, though...those days were surprisingly tumultuous.

"'Tis viiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiile!"

"Really? Damn, I thought I had it that time."

Elisabeth hurled her fork through the air.

Even as it buried itself square in his forehead, Kaito didn't sound concerned in the slightest.

The Torture Princess raged on. However, Kaito lacked a proper sense of danger.

Until Hina showed up, that was how the bulk of their interactions went.

Elisabeth earnestly lamenting about the food.

And Kaito utterly nonplussed by his own culinary ineptitude.

In fact, he seemed to have little motivation to so much as improve his skills. His attitude was the height of disrespect against his master.

He was a foolish servant through and through.

"Hey, how about I brew you some tea? I practiced how the other day, remember?"

"You would truly try to pass off that acrid yet somehow bitter swill as 'tea'?"

"...I'll grill some meat and bring up the wine."

"A worthy standby, to be sure, but I must say, the speed with which you give up is irksome in its own right."

Such was their daily routine.

As stated before, there was no one left who knew how they spent those days.

Now, the Mad King was a character from a fairy tale. A Hero.

A wise and powerful being who knew no pain.

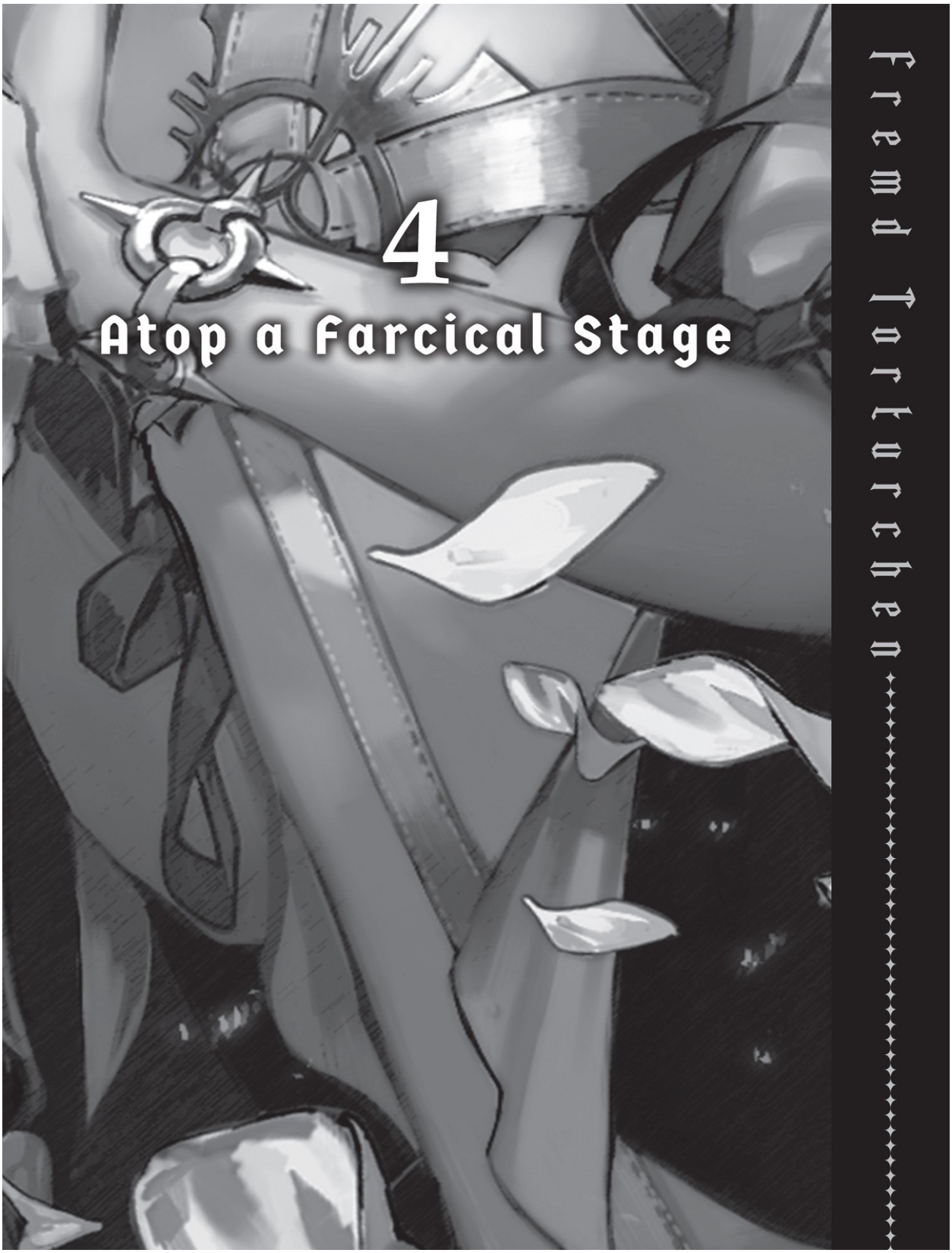
With each telling, the sheep would embellish the tale a little further. They wouldn't mean any harm by it—after all, they were dealing with a figure from legend.

Why not make him out to be as legendary as could be?

But once, the two of them were together.

A small spot of tumult and nonsense against a backdrop of sadness and gloom—that was the memory she would never part with.

That was the story no one knew.



4
Atop a Farcical Stage

4
Atop a Farcical Stage

The room was red. It was dyed all over with the color of fresh blood.

As always, a chessboard sat atop its plain desk.

Things had been bad to begin with, but now the pieces were truly scattered all over the place. The lines of marchers and throngs of rioters had only grown, and it was clear at a glance that the game had been thrown into disarray.

Most noticeable of all, though, was the fact that the person sitting in front of the board was gone.

In his place, there was but a single cold cup of tea.

There *was* a figure in one of the other seats, though.

Not a human, mind you.

No, it was Hina, the Mad King's eternal lover and beloved automaton bride.

For some reason, she was looking down.

She bit her lip, a curtain of her silver hair hanging down around her face. Her petite fists were clenched tight atop the hem of her maid uniform's skirt, and her emerald-green jewel eyes were like veritable oceans of sorrow.

Let us briefly entertain a hypothetical.

If, at that moment, the Torture Princess had been there with her

she would have spoken to her in the gentlest of voices. *Come now—there's no need to be so sad*, she'd have said.

Then she would have stroked her head. A smile suits you far better, does it not?

But hypotheticals are inherently meaningless creations. And without meaning, a creation is good for nothing.

Hina's dearest lady wasn't there. That was the truth, and that was all there was to it.

She was all alone.

And off in the distance

she could hear a girl singing.

*

Apparently, the protests in the Capital came to a surprisingly peaceful conclusion.

To borrow Jeanne's explanation, "**Hags don't fuck around!**"

In a sense, it was utterly incredible how she had managed to convey no information whatsoever.

Afterward, Izabella filled in the blanks.

“When the people were marching, an old woman went and stood in their way, you see. Then she faced the people demanding the Torture Princess be turned over and called them ‘FOOOOOLS!’ at the top of her lungs.”

Then, without so much as faltering, she addressed the crowd.

She said that if they wanted to keep going, they’d have to kill her first.

As she put it, “If y’all aren’t willing to cut down a single old bat like me, then how great can your cause really be?”

It was a dangerous, stupid thing to do. But it worked.

The old woman was dead serious, and in contrast, the throng was utterly exhausted. The march ground to a halt. Eventually, a priest popular among the masses came out and was able to peacefully defuse the situation.

Hearing that last bit came as a surprise to Elisabeth. Not long ago, such a thing would have been unthinkable, but it would appear that after the deaths of Godd Deos and La Christoph, the Church was slowly becoming more proactive. It was a welcome change, as any organization that sat silently and watched events unfold from on high was all too liable to grow twisted and rotten.

Thanks to their efforts, the situation had been resolved without incident. However, one mystery yet remained.

“The thing is, neither Jeanne nor I had any idea who the old woman actually was,” Izabella had concluded her report.

However, Elisabeth had a hunch.

Long, long ago, the Capital was on the verge of being engulfed by a horrible mass of flesh.

Before dealing with the mass, she and Kaito had gone around dispatching underlings. And in the course of doing so, they saved an old woman.

Afterward, the woman got down on her knees and thanked them over and over again. And right before the Torture Princess’s execution, she had grabbed at the spectators’ sleeves and desperately begged them not to execute her rescuer.

Even so, Elisabeth never imagined that she would show up again and with such vigor.

What in the heavens compels her so? …Nay, ’tis simple.

The woman was simply full of regret.

Regret at not having been able to save the person who saved her.

When Elisabeth laid out her theory, Izabella smiled and nodded. *“Then this, too, is the fruit of your labors.”*

Elisabeth elected to withhold her modesty and simply agree. Blood drenched as their world was, it still had budding seeds of hope—seeds that the Torture Princess and her dim-witted servant had strewn behind them as they went.

But in spite of that, the Torture Princess was going to betray everything.

In order to save
the person who saved her.

*

"Well, it's not like I didn't see this coming!"

Of late, Vlad's incessant cheer had become even more pronounced. It was unclear when it had started or what had brought it on, but once again, he was merry as could be. He went on in a lilting tone.

"After all, our original plan was to smash the Diablo pillar, and you at its core along with it, before it could collapse of its own accord! Of course, that plan got shelved when a certain fool decided to shoulder God and Diablo himself, but that in itself was an aberration. As such, returning to the whole smashing plan seems an entirely natural course of events. I have to say, though, what an ungrateful lot they are!"

That was simply the way the world worked.

After all, creation was but an unwanted child born from a single woman's despair.

"And as such, there's little point expecting anything from it! Wouldn't you agree, my precious?"

Vlad thrust his index finger straight at Elisabeth and held the pose.

He was clearly waiting for some sort of response. Again. It would seem that his love for friendly banter with his beloved daughter had not waned. Elisabeth begrudgingly posed a question to him.

"Vlad, why is it you're so needlessly chipper? …And why did you come along, for that matter?"

"What a silly question, my darling. Why, I'm just trying to help my beloved dau— Oh dear, I felt that one."

A needle buried itself in Vlad's left eye with a *squik*. It was one of Elisabeth's Silk Pins. Vlad plucked the blinding weapon out. Just as Elisabeth expected, there wasn't so much as a scratch left on his eye afterward.

In a way, it was impressive how his entire being managed to be so completely and thoroughly farcical.

Elisabeth shrugged, then turned to face forward once more.

A magnificent snowscape lay spread out before her.

They were in a place with no day or night, a pure place crafted from snow and water, wind and mana.

Above them, a rainbow sheen hung in the milky white sky. In truth, though, it was no sky at all.

It was just a hollow space with no sun, no moon, and no stars. The ground was piled high with delicate little snowflakes, like tiny ice sculptures that been dumped out across the ground at random.

…The World's End.

That was how the Saint had designated it.

Elisabeth strode forward through the beautiful, empty, unchanging landscape.

Behind her, Vlad followed along. He claimed that his aim was to help his beloved daughter, but there was no way of telling how true that was. Trying to understand what made He Who Rears Hell Within His Mind tick was no easy feat.

And to obfuscate matters further, Vlad was wearing a most enigmatic smile.

His buffoonish diction remains much the same as always, but that expression of his seems…different somehow.

Elisabeth shook her head. That might be true, but so what?

Now was no time to be getting caught up in his nonsensical pace. She needed to hurry.

After hearing the news from Lute, Elisabeth refrained from immediately acting so as to at least carry out the bare minimum of her duties. Instead, she headed back to her room and waited for Izabella. Izabella gave her report, and Elisabeth conveyed Satisbarina's information to her in turn. Then, once the tripartite conference was over and Maclaeus gave her the order to stand by for the time being…she slipped out of the World Tree.

In all likelihood, the decision to destroy the crystal was made midway through the conference. Yet the order I was given was to stand by for a time. In short, that time is precisely when they aim to mobilize the paladins. If I don't make haste…

Elisabeth had but one objective—to take the crystal with Kaito and Hina sleeping inside and hide it somewhere safe. She already had a spot in mind, so the one issue was how she was going to get the crystal there in a way that couldn't be tracked.

After considering a number of different methods, she eventually just shook her head.

"Eh, I'm sure it'll work out. I am a genius, after all…and more to the point, I haven't the time to spend racking my brain."

Elisabeth's voice trailed off into a hoarse murmur, and as it did, Vlad let out a cry of wonderment.

"Oh-ho, now this is a nostalgic sight! Magnificent as always, I see."

Everything else paled in comparison to the oddity of the sight before them.

It was physical proof of the miracle they had borne witness to.

And it was the image that marked the end of their dilapidated fairy tale.

⁂

Resting before them were two toppled-over pillars of ivy.

They were like corpses of giants, each lying atop the other and propping it up.

A cave sat at their center, like a profane little shrine, and the ivy's surface was still dotted with azure and crimson roses. Because of that, petals of both hues fluttered through the air without end.

All in all, it made for a magnificent, florid sight, like something out of a pagan festival.

And at the very center of it all, deep within the cave, sat a crystal.

A man and woman were sleeping inside it.

Their expressions were tranquil, and because of how transparent the crystal was, they looked almost close enough to touch from the outside. In truth, though, they were farther than the World's End, like unreachable flowers frozen in ice.

And in front of Kaito Sena and Hina's unwaking forms—

"…I see. I'd not have thought you'd go to such lengths. 'Twould seem the Craven King has become quite the force to be reckoned with."

—stood a young man clad in fine furs. A sizable group of paladins stood at the ready behind him.

Jeanne and Izabella accompanied him, too, as did a number of saints. His hands were clasped together sadly.

It was Maclaeus Filliana.

As the human king stood before the crystal of sacrifice at the World's End

he slowly raised his head.

*

"So you anticipated my actions, then… Or, no, you intentionally let the information slip to Lute, didn't you?"

"It's sad, Elisabeth. Every person in this world owes their life to the Mad King."

Maclaeus answered Elisabeth's question by talking about something entirely unrelated, which she took as an affirmation. She narrowed her eyes threateningly. However, Maclaeus didn't falter.

"Sir Kaito Sena was a much better king than I am. In fact, you could even call him a messiah. And yet nobody cares in the slightest for *his* well-being. It's a sad state of affairs, and honestly, quite shameful. However…"

The greatest outcome was, as always, the greatest good for the greatest number. True dominion of the board lay with those powerless pawns. In a sense, the masses were like a single sprawling ruler. The things they thought and said had profound effects on the rest of the board.

For how could they not?

"Peace needs to be… *I* need to maintain peace, so this is the only choice I have."

"Hmm. 'Choice,' eh?"

Lute was a sworn friend of Kaito Sena's and the person who regretted Ragnarok's outcome the most. With him stationed in the tripartite

conference, 'twas but a matter of time before the information made its way to me. 'Tis a simple enough trap, but… No…

Something was off—Elisabeth could feel it. But then—

Clang.

A hard noise rang out, as though to cut off her train of thought.

Two women stood before Maclaeus.

To his left, silver. To his right, gold.

Like a silver rapier and a golden flower.

Both were breathtakingly beautiful, and both were well acquainted with the landscape of the World's End.

And there was something else they had in common, too, Elisabeth knew—they were both terrifying to have as enemies.

"Izabella and Jeanne… I never imagined I would end up fighting you two lovebirds."

"Nor did I. It's regrettable that things have come to this," responded Izabella.

"Is it? I myself think it's quite wonderful. Somehow or other, the lady and I have never had a proper battle. *This* might not be half-bad. **Also, we ain't lovebirds! And not for lack of tryin', but that shit's easier said than done!**"

Jeanne ended her comment on an expressionless lament. As always, she knew where her priorities lay.

Now that she had Izabella and Jeanne's reactions to go off, Elisabeth thought back over the situation.

Ah, aye. Sure enough…

She wordlessly cast her crimson gaze toward Maclaeus. However, he too said nothing.

The paladins and saints lined up behind him were silent as well. One of the saints, a young girl with both legs bound, returned Elisabeth's gaze with a cold glare. Next, Elisabeth turned around.

Unsurprisingly, Vlad was smiling. This time, though, it was back to his normal condescending smirk.

Now Elisabeth could tell exactly what was going on. However, she nodded nonetheless.

"Very well—then battle it shall be."

Her tone was that of a child who had just been invited to play.

She tapped her toes on the ground twice, and the snow crystals falling around her cracked and shattered. Their fragments glinted radiantly as they floated through the air. The Torture Princess, surrounded by their light, extended her fair arm straight out.

A long sword's handle fell into her upturned palm.

Elisabeth grabbed her blade. Jeanne raised her hand, the very image of an orchestral conductor. Izabella dropped to all fours like a feral animal. The paladins gulped. The saints offered no reaction. And the king closed his eyes.

Elisabeth twirled her sword, its blade carving through the air as it turned. She held it at the ready.

That moment, everyone present saw the same vision.

It was as though rich music had just filled the air—

“Executioner’s Sword of Frankenthal.”

“Waltz.”

—for it was clear to all that a ball had just begun.

A ball replete with the sound of blades lightly clashing.

*

Azure and crimson petals danced in unison. Crystalline snowflakes glinted in the light.

And beneath the milky-white sky, they were joined by a series of sharp silver flashes.

Izabella wielded her arms as weapons, each one like a metal whip, their strikes arcing through the air like a blow from a scythe.

Many of her fingers had been replaced with mechanical substitutes, and any one of her attacks would be sufficient to rend flesh and crush organs. Yet not only did Elisabeth evade her deadly strikes, she did it with footwork reminiscent of a dancer’s.

Then she leaped backward with feline agility, landing on her feet with a light tap.

Her black hair hung in the air.

Before she had a chance to blink, Izabella closed the gap and bore down on her. Normally, no human could have possibly moved that fast.

However, Elisabeth just snapped her fingers without so much as pausing.

“Recreation of the Plain of Skewers: Impaled Victim.”

An ugly noise rang out as the earth split open and stakes exploded up from the ground.

Izabella reacted immediately, twisting her body at a sharp angle as far as it would go to avoid the stakes. “Flexible” didn’t even begin to describe it—if anything, she looked like a puppet being pulled about by strings.

And what’s more, she even evaded the stakes coming at her from her blind spots. Even so, it would appear that she was still the one in charge of regulating and maintaining her core strength. As Elisabeth watched the unified decision-making in action, she gave an admiring nod.

Ah…’tis well and truly a waltz for two.

The women of gold and silver were dancing as a pair.

All of a sudden, Izabella grabbed a stake as it sprouted up beside her, wrenched it from the ground like an animal gnawing off a hunk of meat, and hurled it at Elisabeth. It shot through the air with the speed of a cannonball. Elisabeth brandished her sword.

Then the world stood still.

Or at least, that was how it looked to the paladins.

As the stake approached her head-on, the Torture Princess cut it down.

While the thunderous noise of her slash rang out, a great rush of crimson flower petals flew through the air like a chorus of cheering voices.

And for a moment, neither side moved.

Elisabeth and Izabella faced each other, neither saying a word.

The silence was almost deafening. The air was fraught with tension. And as before, the saints didn't move. Nor did Vlad. Nobody wanted to break the unnatural stillness.

Two pairs of eyes, one crimson and the other a mismatched blue and purple, stared into each other.

Both women smiled ever so faintly.

Then they dashed forward in unison.

Elisabeth held her long sword aloft. Izabella reached out with her armored arms.

The two clanged into each other. Both sides mercilessly pressed forward, each refusing to give so much as an inch.

All the while, the gears in Izabella's face continued turning, their constant ticking and tocking a complete tonal mismatch with the rest of the scene.

The woman of black and the woman of silver drew together, their lips so close they were practically kissing.

Then Izabella let out a whisper that was barely more than a sigh.

"I take it you've noticed, Elisabeth?"

"Of course. Izabella Vicker…you're holding back."

Sparks flew.

And as they did, the two parted.

*

Silver and black hair became intertwined, got entangled, then came free.

It made for such a bewitchingly beautiful sight one almost forgot they were watching a battle.

The two women twirled round each other thrice, then came back together. Sword and palm met, as hands would of partners reuniting in a ballroom dance. Elisabeth and Izabella shared another surreptitious exchange.

"Good, then we're on the same page. King Maclaeus knows as well. Destroying the crystal with God and Diablo inside would eliminate a great weakness of ours, but it would also remove the sole thing keeping the rebels from going completely on the warpath. We would ensure our safety for a time, but it would eventually lead to our ruin. As such—"

"—our best option is to steal the crystal and hide it beyond the masses' reach. 'Tis quite the crafty plan, to say nothing of the fact that it forces sin upon my shoulders without so much as my consent."

“Yes, that’s the problem. I know it’s a lot to ask of you, but would you be willing to bear that burden?”

“’Tis a good plan. I’ve no objections. I am the Torture Princess, after all. A woman steeped in sin. Crown me with thorns and cast stones at me all you please.”

Elisabeth’s voice was quiet but dignified all the same. Izabella gave her a small nod.

All the while, their blades kept screeching against each other.

Elisabeth jumped back, casting a shower of sparks in her wake. She took another look around. The paladins couldn’t intervene for fear of exacerbating the situation, and moreover, they had been swallowed up by the atmosphere of the scene. However, Vlad was staying just as motionless as the saints.

And this was why.

In a sense, their current situation was taking place atop the farcical stage as well.

All the people gathered there were but witnesses to the charade, and in all likelihood, many of them had no idea about the Torture Princess’s arrangement with the king. And that was for the best.

The fewer people who knew, the less likely the truth would be to get out. That was probably also why he hadn’t told Elisabeth about it beforehand. Deciding to have her pull it off with no advance warning had been a risky gambit, but he had threaded the needle excellently.

Plus, there was something else the Torture Princess knew.

This choice of his…’Tis not only I who bear a heavy burden but Maclaeus as well.

There were many who had their eyes on the throne, and given how weary and angry the people were, there was a fair chance the mob would hang the king for his failure. Elisabeth shot Maclaeus a questioning gaze. *Are you really fine with this?* However, he offered her no answer.

And that in itself was answer enough.

There was no need for him to say it aloud.

“…Good heavens. I commend him on his growth, but perhaps he’s matured too much for his own good.”

Elisabeth’s voice was a low murmur. Maclaeus looked up to Kaito Sena, and he deeply regretted having forced everything onto him. Now, though, the king who once fled on his own had braced himself for the weight of responsibility.

Elisabeth thought back on what La Christoph’s disciple had said.

“People who bear such burdens seem so sad, each and every one of them.”

However, her ruminations were cut short.

Taking advantage of her lapse in concentration, Izabella drew a concealed knife and threw it at her. The Torture Princess tilted her neck,

but her decision to evade using the smallest motion necessary ended up being a poor one. A thin red line appeared across her fair throat.

And a moment later

fresh blood splattered across the frozen ground.

*

Red, crimson, scarlet.

Soiling the pristine earth.

Without even sparing a glance toward the blood, Elisabeth snapped her fingers. There was no time to neatly heal the wound. Instead, she chose to roughly stitch it closed with string, an act that bore a striking resemblance to torture. More knives followed the first, but this time, Elisabeth sliced them away.

Upon catching one knife on the tip of her sword, she spun her body in a half-turn. The knife, newly propelled, shot back toward its original thrower. Right before it landed, though, Izabella leaned forward and bit down. A horrible ringing noise reverberated through the air.

The blade glinted as it sat pinned between her teeth.

The paladins let out cries of shock and amazement.

And thus did the extravagant dance continue.

Meanwhile, the blood that fell from Elisabeth's throat *began moving*.

Its crimson trail slithered across the ground like a snake, carving through the ice and forming a precise pattern. Finally, crimson met crimson. The snake had swallowed its own tail, and the trail's start and end were linked.

A complete teleportation circle now sat on the ground with Kaito and Hina's crystal at its center. The blood began glowing.

Feigning surprise, Izabella stopped in her tracks.

And Elisabeth, presented with a flagrant opening, took it. She fired off a roundhouse kick.

"Gah!"

The kick landed squarely in Izabella's gut. After going still for a moment, she went hurtling out of the teleportation circle's radius, bouncing off the ground several times and crushing piled-up snowflakes beneath her with each step. Eventually, she rolled to an unseemly stop. With an injury like that, not even a seasoned veteran would guess that she'd taken the fall on purpose.

Jeanne bit her lip. In all likelihood, she objected to the decision. However, Izabella's had been a necessary sacrifice. The more pain that was suffered, the better it would sell the lie.

That went for Izabella, Elisabeth…everyone.

And so without pausing to reflect, the Torture Princess raised her voice, loud and brazen.

"You're finished!"

“My liege, get back! It’s dangerous!”

Just as she expected, the paladins quickly moved to get the king outside the circle. They readied their shields and drew their swords, but they knew full well how powerful the Torture Princess was. They made no moves other than to protect the king. It was a prudent decision.

Elisabeth nodded. All the audience members had left the stage.

Now it was time for the ball’s curtain to fall.

The Torture Princess gave an elegant bow, and her black hair fluttered as she raised her head back up. Maclaeus was standing silently behind the paladins’ guard. The Torture Princess mouthed a silent whisper.

“Farewell, Maclaeus, O tragic king of man, O wise fool who admired the Mad King.”

“Good-bye, Elisabeth Le Fanu. May you find yourself in good health until the day they string us both up.”

The two of them locked eyes for a moment, knowing it might well be their final parting. Then they quietly averted their gazes. A wall of crimson rose up between them. Light from the teleportation circle danced through the air, and the petals began hardening.

The cylindrical pillar was complete. And in that moment

“Ah!”

the moment before the crimson blocked out everything

they sensed a wave of malice so hideous it was almost palpable.

“Daughter of mine!”

Vlad let out a rare scream. The pillar cracked. There was a hole right in the middle of its wall. And through it…

…a massive amount of blood could be seen gushing from Elisabeth’s shoulder.

*

“Wha—?”

That was enough to strike even the Torture Princess speechless. Not only had the attack pierced through her teleportation circle, but it still had strength after breaching the wall. That was a feat no ordinary attack could boast. To say it was unexpected would be an understatement. However, Elisabeth choked down her alarm and focused her attention on her shoulder. Upon seeing what was squirming atop it, she finally realized what had happened.

It was a divine beast in the form of an albino rat snake. Its long body was faintly luminescent, and its scales rippled and flowed.

If you wanted something to bite holes in dark magic, you’d be hard-pressed to find a better option.

“Bah, how annoying!”

Fully removing its fangs would take time.

Instead, Elisabeth chose to prioritize mending the teleportation circle while still keeping its destination masked. If the unthinkable happened and she got caught, it wouldn't just put her in jeopardy but Maclaeus as well.

Between the pain and the blood loss, her body temperature began rapidly dropping. However, she chose to ignore that fact.

Pain was but something to be swallowed down.

That was what Kaito Sena had done.

Seeing her lack of resistance, the snake began slithering around and trying to gnaw through her shoulder. Elisabeth scoffed.

I can reattach it later or else find a replacement. In fact, you'd be doing me a favor—with the arm loose, I can crush it and you in one fell swoop.

But right when the Torture Princess made her decision…

"…Hmm?"

…a *splat* sounded out…

…and the snake's belly went limp.

Golden light poured from its body in place of blood.

Elisabeth furrowed her brow, then looked over in the direction of the most likely culprit.

However, Vlad wasn't the one she had to thank. He hadn't so much as moved from his spot. He had merely thrust out his arm, as though calling something. There was a rare serious look in his crimson eyes, and he was staring at the empty sky.

It was a peculiar gesture, but it seemed to have done the trick.

Upon further inspection, the snake had been pierced through by a beast's fangs.

A displeased voice rumbled up, as though coming from the bowels of the earth.

"After all this time, this is what you call me for? I am not a snare for snake hunting, and you would do well not to treat me as one."

The voice belonged to a black dog the size of a small cow.

Each of his eyes burned bright with hellfire.

After pinning the divine beast's tail in place with his forepaws, he ripped through its torso with his jaw, swallowing it down without allowing it so much as death throes. Divine beast or not, the gap between its power and his was unimaginably vast.

Elisabeth pressed down on her shoulder as she called out his name.

"…It's been some time. It wouldn't have killed you to show up a tad sooner, though, *Kaiser*."

"Ha, it seems you don't know your place. Would you like me to pick up where the snake left off?"

The Kaiser, supreme hound and strongest of the fourteen demons, snorted derisively.

His existence was the primary reason Vlad hadn't been executed.

After the end of days, the Kaiser declared that he had grown bored of humans and disappeared. It was a completely demonic yet utterly un-

demonic act of capriciousness. However, the fact remained that Vlad was the one who'd inherited his contract from the Mad King.

And executing the Kaiser's contractor was easier said than done.

If they tried to behead him or trigger his self-destruct device, there was a fair danger that the executioner would find themselves on the business end of a black dog's fangs.

Of course, in his case, even if Vlad were about to be executed…would he show up? One wonders…'Twould depend…on his mood…no…doubt… Ah, this is bad. I feel faint…

Elisabeth took another look at her wound.

Crimson streams were pouring out from between the fingers she was using to press down on it.

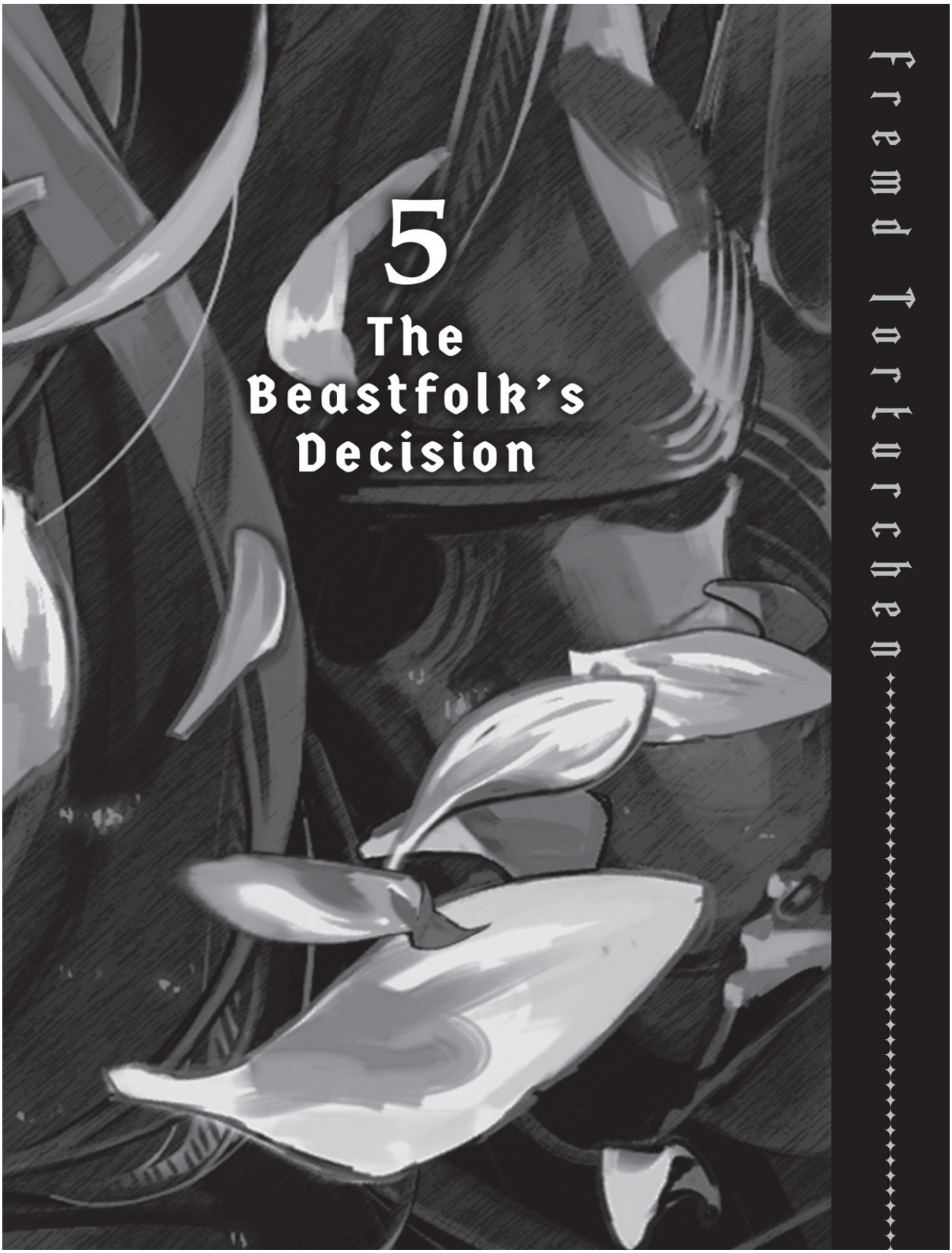
Dark magic matched up poorly against divine beasts. She was losing too much blood.

Elisabeth leaned back against the shattering teleportation circle's wall, then slid down until she was seated atop the icy ground. She took a moment to think back on what she'd just seen, blurry as her vision had been.

"That…was…"

The young saint girl's eyes

had been burning with a brutal, intense hatred.



5
The Beastfolk's Decision

5
The Beastfolk's Decision

The red room was deathly quiet. The chessboard was a mess, and the pieces were in utter disarray. Plus, there weren't even any players. All that remained by the desk was a cold cup of tea.

At the moment, that place, that place where nobody ought to be—

—had a visitor.

A woman had appeared—

—in that room, farther than the World's End.

*

To. Fro. Chitter. Chatter.

There was a voice.

It wasn't clear if it was a dream or reality, but there was definitely someone singing. It was a young girl, her voice loud and full of pride. She called out, her tone that of a person dashing through a field with deranged abandon and laughing their head off. "Come now," she was saying, "let's be good girls and sing a song."

"Holy, Holy, Holy!

"Lord God Almighty, thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever.

"Amen.

"Hallelujah."

The last line was the Grave Keeper's final statement. It was odd. Why did people say hallelujah and wish blessings on one another? Why did they sing songs so rife with contradictions? Why did they give such perverse orders? How could they do all that yet remain utterly blind to their own sins?

Until the day of your death, try to do some good at least.

And if you cannot do good, then die.

However, the very premise was flawed. What was "good"?

What did the world that turned ever so properly deem good?

At this point, is anything truly "good"?

"…eth…sa…beth… Lady…Elisa… Lady Elisabeth!"

"…Hmm? What's going on there? You're making a racket."

Upon hearing someone call for her, Elisabeth suddenly came to.

When she did, she discovered a pair of emerald eyes wet with grief blinking right beside her. They weren't human eyes; they were actual jewels. It made for a beautiful sight and one that stirred up a wave of

nostalgia in Elisabeth. When she saw them, she finally understood her situation, which came as a great relief.

It was a delightful silver-haired maid peering straight at her.

“Oh, Hina, it’s you. In that case, all is forgiven.”

Elisabeth let out a small breath, then shook her head. Pain’s aftertaste still lingered in her body, and she felt as though she’d just had the most horrible nightmare. However, she was unsure how much of it had been a dream and how much had actually been real.

Wanting to know where she was, she glanced around.

Upon doing so, though, a deep furrow made its way across her brow.

“…Wait, where are we?”

The room was red.

It was dyed all over with the color of fresh blood, and it was the kind of room that burrowed its way into your eyeballs and chipped away at your brain.

A chessboard sat atop the plain desk at its center.

Elisabeth stood and walked over to it.

Upon peering down at it, she couldn’t help but scrunch up her face. The pieces’ arrangement was a mess, and even at a glance, it was obvious that the game was in a state of abject chaos. And to top things off, there weren’t even any players. All that remained by the desk was a cold cup of tea.

The oddest thing, though, was there were two pieces submerged in that cup.

Elisabeth plucked them out. A red droplet dripped down her wrist.

That was not tea in the cups. It was blood, and it dripped off the sword-brandishing boy piece and halberd-wielding maid piece as they rose.

As she looked at the strange designs, Elisabeth finally realized something.

“Wait… Hina? Hina?!”

Hina was Kaito Sena’s eternal lover and beloved automaton bride.

She was also the Torture Princess’s maid—a kind woman and one whom she held great affection toward.

However, she was also someone who had no right to be there.

After all, she and Kaito Sena were locked in a deep slumber within a crystal.

Elisabeth whirled back around as though she’d been struck. She stared intently at the maid standing there.

Hina gave a pained smile. However, she then abruptly looked down and bit her lip as her silver hair draped in front of her face. She gripped the hem of her maid uniform’s skirt.

Elisabeth hurriedly rushed over to her. She had a million questions—where they were, for example, and why Hina was there—but she immediately discarded them all.

Hina was mourning right before her eyes. That was the only thing that mattered.

Elisabeth stroked her cheek, then stroked her head through her soft maid cap.

“Come now—there’s no need to be so sad. A smile suits you far better, does it not?”

Hina’s eyes went wide. She said nothing, and tears began streaming down her cheeks in large drops.

Seeing that sent Elisabeth into a tizzy. “What’s going on? What’s wrong? Is it something I did?” All of a sudden, though, Hina grabbed her hand. Elisabeth’s eyes went wide.

Hina desperately squeezed her hand, tears still pouring down her face. Then, for some reason, she began talking just about as fast as her mouth would let her.

“There are a lot of sad things happening to you right now, Lady Elisabeth. Sad things, and painful things, and difficult things, and horrible things, and unforgivable things… And I’m certain there will only be more of them from here on out! But please, Lady Elisabeth, you must believe. And no matter what happens, you mustn’t forget.”

Hina raised her downturned face with great vigor. Her tears gleamed like tiny stars as they scattered through the air. Elisabeth had no time to so much as get in a question edgewise. As though pressed for time, Hina continued her fervent plea.

“We… That is, Master Kaito and I, we love you so much! So please, you must protect this world of yours. Please…if you remember nothing else, remember that.”

“How could I possibly forget?”

Elisabeth's statement rang with a certain coldness. Hina gasped. However, Elisabeth quickly gave her a smile. The Torture Princess then returned her grasp, clasping Hina's hand in both of hers.

Elisabeth gently stroked the back of Hina's hand. The Torture Princess made her calm proclamation.

"I love you, too, Hina. I could never forget that…not even if I wished to. Nor shall I. Never, ever, ever."

Thus did Elisabeth make her promise, her tone reminiscent of a child's.

Hina blinked. At long last, a smile spread across her face, like a beautiful flower opening its petals. However, her expression quickly darkened again. With her face scrunched up like she was going to resume crying, she untangled her hand from Elisabeth's.

Her fingers' faint warmth grew distant.

Puzzled, Elisabeth finally asked a question.

"…Hina, what's the matter?"

"It's time for us to go our separate ways, Lady Elisabeth. Someday, I'm sure…we'll… No…no, perhaps not. Please, though…please do take care of yourself."

Little by little, Hina's voice grew fainter, and her face etched with its childlike sorrow grew more and more distant. Eventually, her familiar visage disappeared from view entirely. Elisabeth reached out, but those slender fingers of hers were nowhere to be found.

"Wait," Elisabeth tried to beg her. "Don't go." But her voice wouldn't come out.

Everything was growing hazy.

For a moment, she thought she saw a shadowy figure. However, that too soon fluttered away into the darkness.

It was unclear how much was dream

and how much was reality

but either way, everything came crumbling down.

Elisabeth called out desperately to the figure she hoped beyond hope was real.

"Don't go, Hina! Don't go!"

"……eth…sa…th……beth…Elisabeth!"

"Hina!"

Elisabeth sat up with a start. Her head smacked into someone, hard.

"Hey, ow!" they yelped.

She tilted her head to the side. *Hmm?*

⁂

She heard an oddly familiar voice as well as an oddly unbefitting quote coming from it.

Right in front of her, the usual suspect was rubbing his jaw.

“Goodness, these surprise attacks are starting to get to me. That was a sincere cry I let out there.”

“Calling that ‘sincere’ is about the scariest lie I can imagine.”

Hearing that man say “ow” like that was unsettling in the extreme.

What if that wasn’t a lie, though? Elisabeth’s face paled a little. Perhaps she was overreacting, but the prospect was scary enough to warrant it.

Vlad shrugged discontentedly at his beloved daughter’s words.

“You know, I’ll remind you that *you’re* the one who head-butted my jaw. Well, no matter, I suppose. The long rebellious phase marches on, and it’s up to my *paternal love* to be equal to it. You were tossing in your sleep—is something wrong?”

It was unclear if Vlad’s allusion to his “paternal love” came from a place of sincerity or mockery, but either way, Elisabeth decided to refrain from attacking him over it. She pressed down on her forehead. She had just been having a dream; she was sure of it.

A lonely, nostalgic nightmare.

And yet she couldn’t remember so much as a single detail about it.

“…No, ’tis nothing. I think.”

“Are you sure? But Elisabeth, you— Heh. You kept not waking up, so I tried calling you by your name for a change. Ah, the memories it brings back. Back to the matter at hand, though, you say nothing’s wrong, but…”

Vlad curled his lips. Elisabeth narrowed her eyes—if he had something he wanted to say, she’d just as soon he said it.

All of a sudden, something fell from the corner of her eye. The Torture Princess quickly wiped it away with her finger to try and pretend it hadn’t happened. However, Vlad wasn’t about to let it slide so easily.

“…it looks to me like you’re *crying*.”

“…I’m sure I haven’t the faintest idea what you’re talking about.”

Elisabeth’s reply was cold and blunt. The thing that had fallen was something most unbefitting the Torture Princess. In fact, it was utterly unacceptable. But if it had, indeed, fallen…

…then it must have fallen on behalf of someone from her dream.

Someone inside a crystal, who could no longer cry themselves.

⁂

“So this is… Ah.”

Elisabeth took another look around.

The place they were in was most peculiar indeed.

For one, everything she could see was hard.

That was due to the boulders piled up all around them.

Kaito and Hina’s crystal was narrowly wedged in between them, and the two of them were sleeping peacefully in the darkness of the boulders’ shadows. However, there were also a series of sunbeams streaming down on them from overhead.

By following the golden rays with her gaze, she could make out the heavens far, far above.

She wasn't sure how much time had passed, but the sky above was clear and sunny.

Its deep blue contrasted against the two mountain ranges that towered high up into it. Their peaks were misshapen, evidence of the magical explosion they'd been subjected to.

The boulders piled around them were the remnants of those shattered peaks, but before the explosion, the area had been home to some humble abodes and horribly mangled corpses. The alchemists who lived there had willingly sacrificed themselves to give birth to the golden Torture Princess, and now they were all buried beneath the boulders. The area had been destroyed, just as they intended.

In short, Elisabeth and Vlad were at the alchemists' hidden village.

The birthplace of Jeanne de Rais.

"So we reached the destination safely, then… I visited this place but once, after hearing of it from Jeanne and coming in hopes of learning something from the magical traces here. And what's more, that was over two years ago. Impressive, I should think, that I made it here successfully under such conditions. I really *am* a genius… Wait, what of my wound?"

Elisabeth turned her gaze over to her shoulder. When she did, she found herself struck speechless.

There was a bandage wrapped around it. Whoever tied it had evidently tried to do so carefully, but their results were clumsy at best.

Elisabeth lifted the bandage to check on the wound. It was healing quite nicely, and the flesh had successfully knit itself back together. However, she clearly didn't have Vlad to thank—pointless acts like "wrapping it in a bandage, just in case" weren't exactly his style.

But then…who?

Elisabeth fumbled through her vague memories.

Indistinct flashes of the final bits rose to the forefront of her mind.

A sad face disappearing. A familiar figure vanishing. Reaching out and being unable to find their slender fingers. Trying to beg them not to go but being unable to speak. Everything growing hazy.

And then, for a moment, feeling like she saw a shadowy figure.

However, that too *fluttered* away into the darkness.

"A shadowy figure…fluttering? A figure…in tattered rags, perhaps?"

It was unclear how much was dream

and how much was reality

but either way, everything came crumbling down.

"No, it can't be."

There was only one person she could think of who fit that description. But Elisabeth shook her head. *He* was dead. He had cast himself into the abyss, sacrificing himself to fulfill the role allotted to him by his mother.

Never again would he return.

Suddenly, a deep voice rumbled out. It belonged to a black dog, and it rang with a deep, intense boredom.

“So what do you intend to do, foolish child?”

“About what, Kaiser? What is it you’re asking me?”

Elisabeth responded to the vague query as befitted such a question, and the supreme hound slammed his tail against the ground in irritation. As cracks splintered across the boulders near the impact site, he roughly gestured its supple black mass toward the crystal.

“It should go without saying that I’m asking what you plan to do with that. Such an ugly ruckus, this business about handing it over and smashing it and so forth. As always, humans are utterly incapable of making sound decisions.”

Normally, the human condition lay beyond demonic understanding. However, that particular beast had come to know hatred, and as such probably had a better handle on the rebels’ motivations than most. However, he wasn’t finished.

“And that goes for you, too. Mankind’s shallow deeds are misguided and fraught with error, each and every one of them. All this nonsense comes far too late.

“Eventually, the end of days would surely come once more.

“Geh-heh-heh-heh-heh-heh, fu-heh-heh-heh-heh-heh, geh-heh-heh-heh-heh-heh.”

When he laughed, his voice sounded almost human. Their imminent crisis was only the tip of the iceberg.

A true, final end was coming.

It was an ominous, despair-inducing prediction

and to it, Elisabeth gave a resigned nod.

*

Now then, it’s time for a story. A tale of reality told as would be a fairy tale.

A tale of God and Diablo.

Such was the manner in which Vlad eloquently began his speech.

“Three years ago, the world very nearly met a tragic end.”

However, that seemingly immutable fate was altered by a single individual.

After burdening himself with God and Diablo, the boy fell into a deep slumber at the World’s End. Thanks to his deeds, the people of the world managed to avoid the apocalypse. The greatest good for the greatest number was, surely, the greatest outcome.

One could say they all lived happily ever after. But whenever someone’s story ends, there are some things that yet remain.

With its lease on life renewed, the world continued on.

But the bells would eventually toll on a new curtain’s rise.

"…For that is the way bells and curtains are. And oh, how they toll! God and Diablo—entities with the power to destroy and rebuild worlds—exist. And now, all three races are now fully aware of their existence!"

Now everyone knew that there was a way to destroy the world.

The true menace, the true threat, was the survivors' changed perceptions. After all, the true value of information lay in its ability to set people's minds in motion. And now that everyone knew that the world was something that can be ended, the end of days was no longer a pipe dream or a legend.

It was oh-so-very real.

"'The end of days cometh, and *destroying the world is an attainable feat*.' With that fact proven, people will undoubtedly come out of the woodwork to try it for themselves. And in a sense, they won't even be doing it maliciously. For you see…"

"'What kind of villain sees a chance to turn the world on its head and doesn't take it,' was it?"

Elisabeth took over for the closing remarks, and Vlad nodded in agreement.

She was self-aware enough to realize what was going on. The mob's decision had been mistaken, but the Torture Princess's response had amounted to little more than grandstanding. On a long enough timeline, temporarily hiding Kaito Sena in an attempt to keep God and Diablo safe or destroying the vessel to return them to the ether would both end the same way.

At the moment, the strongest thing mankind could summon was the Kaiser, apex of the fourteen demons. But now that it had been conclusively proved that the reconstruction happened, it was only a matter of time before more and more people began trying to summon God and Diablo.

Having a clear goal allowed mankind to reach it in far fewer years than would otherwise be required.

Astronomic as the odds were, having God and Diablo under control like this was still far better than having someone else summon them and return the world to nothingness.

One way or the other, though, ruin would eventually come.

No matter what option they chose.

After all, this world was but an unwanted child born from a single woman's despair.

As such, it was in its nature to eventually end. Every option led down the same road—all they were doing was delaying the inevitable.

And so to save this world in the truest sense of the word…

…would require freeing it from the God and Diablo system altogether.

The Kaiser, an entity above all that, scoffed at the folly of man.

"Your human perspectives are too puny to grasp it all, I imagine. But from my vantage on high, it's plain to see that even with the end of days averted, it will eventually come to pass all the same. Two points in time, all

but overlapping… And in that sense, my previous unworthy master, Accumulation of Seventeen Years' Pain, is the greatest dunce of you all. And yet…

"…I find it hard to imagine him being that blind."

The final words escaped the Kaiser's mouth as little more than a murmur. His tone betrayed a surprising amount of confidence in Kaito Sena.

Vlad's unpleasant smile widened. He opened his mouth, ostensibly to poke fun at the Kaiser.

Wanting to avoid having a fight break out, Elisabeth made to stop him.

At the last moment, though, she found something more pressing to comment on.

"Now, would you be so kind as to tell me why you followed us here… Lute?"

*

"My deepest apologies. The thing is, I was actually at the World's End back then as well."

A timid voice she was well familiar with rose up in reply, and a copper-furred wolfman made his way out from behind the crystal.

Neither Vlad nor the Kaiser offered any reaction. Apparently, Elisabeth was the only one who hadn't noticed him. She clicked her tongue, annoyed at her own oversight. Perhaps she really was going soft.

Upon hearing that, Lute's tail curled into a ball. He clearly thought it had been directed at him. However, Elisabeth waved her hand to dispel the misconception, and Lute's flattened tail and ears returned to their usual state.

Still nervously cowering a little, he went on.

"I must say, that battle was a thing of beauty. But right as I was watching in secret, utterly transfixed, the saint fired off her unauthorized attack, and things immediately got chaotic. She must have been concerned for Madam Izabella's safety, I imagine. Anyhow, I took advantage of the confusion to slip into the teleportation circle. As for why…"

"*How* you got here is beside the point—so long as you've no intention of turning on me, that is. This reason of yours is what concerns me—"

"And you want to know what he plans on doing now, I imagine."

A response came, but the voice it belonged to wasn't Lute's.

Lute bowed low and took a step backward.

A panther-headed beastman strode forth to take his place. His night-hued frame was adorned with a cloak of white wolf fur and a military uniform of the finest make. His fur was short, his figure was lean, and he carried himself with majesty and grace.

Elisabeth narrowed her eyes. Even she knew who he was.

He was nowhere near as renowned as the first imperial princess, Valisisa Ula Forstlast the Dynast, or the second imperial princess, Vyade Ula

Forstlast the Wise Wolf, but he too had been named as a member of the imperial family by the Three Kings of the Forest.

As far as age was concerned, he was Valisisa's junior and Vyade's senior.

"First prince Vyadryavka Ula Forstlast."

Elisabeth spoke the man's name. He nodded, then gave his cloak a flourish. It flared out behind him, and the ornamental peafowl feathers on his shoulders fluttered along with it. Then, as Elisabeth looked at him in puzzlement, he made his move.

Without a shred of hesitation, the first imperial beastfolk prince

knelt before the Torture Princess.

Then, still on one knee, he gave Elisabeth a deep bow. She regarded him with suspicion.

"What's this now?"

"It's quite simple, Torture Princess Elisabeth Le Fanu. I kneel before you with a humble request. We can no longer place our trust in the humans. But you are a different matter, and my people have a score that still needs settling."

"And what score is that?"

"Our emotions run deep, and our honor runs deeper. My sisters were murdered, and we will not take that lying down. So as such…"

One of Vyadryavka's fists was pressed against the ground, and he clenched it tight.

Elisabeth thought back. Some of the demi-humans had betrayed humanity and sided with those of mixed race. In contrast, the beastfolk had maintained the status quo. However, it was clear to demi-humans and beastfolk alike that the humans could no longer be trusted.

So what were the beastfolk to do?

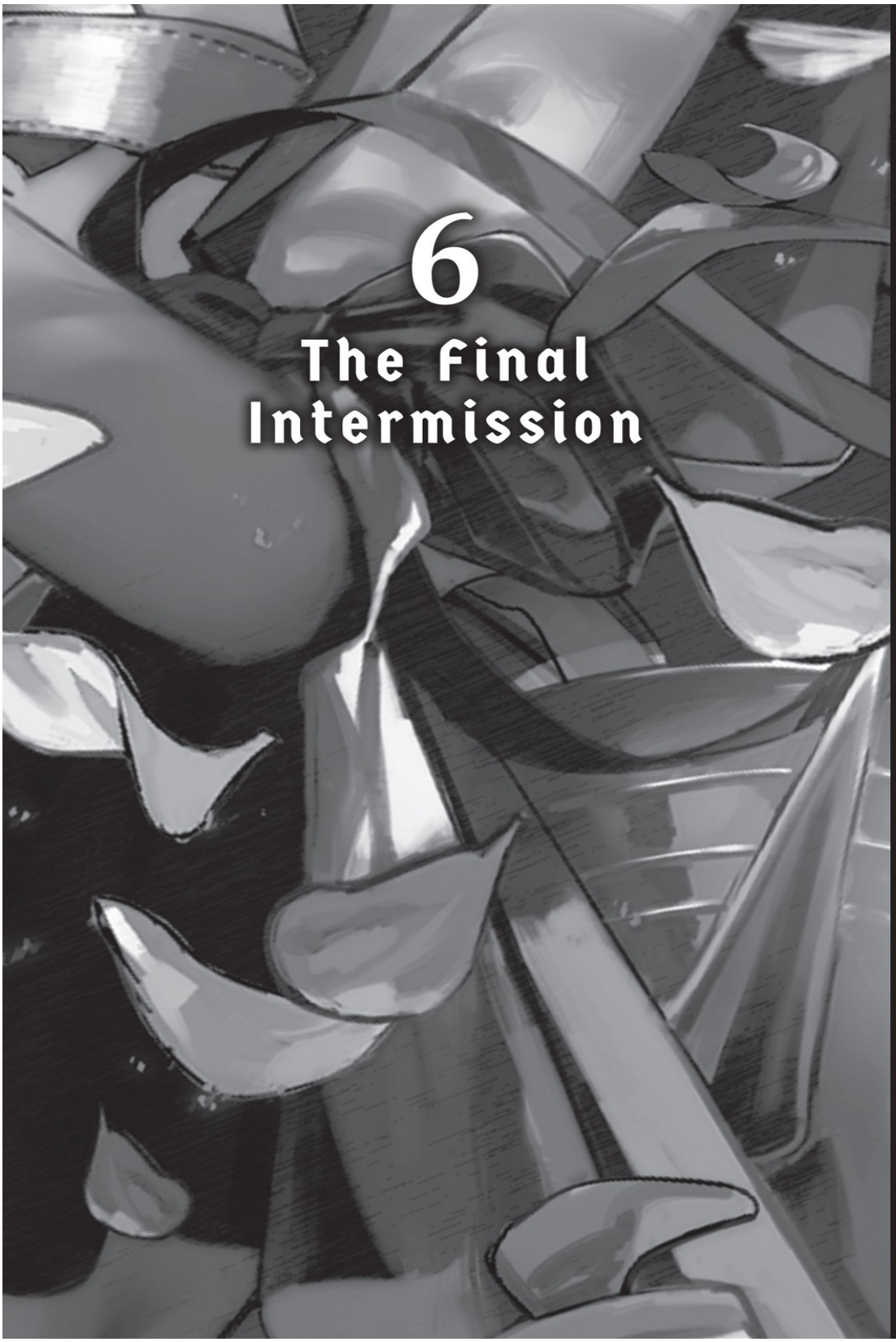
The answer was right before her.

"…we intend to receive the betrayer of humanity as an honored guest."

The first imperial beastfolk prince made his declaration.

His aim was as Vyade's had been when she extended her invitation to Kaito all those years ago:

to pick up a blade the humans cast aside in order to do battle with it.



6
The Final Intermission

6
The Final Intermission

The room

was as red as always

the chess pieces atop the board were in utter disarray

and there was a woman crying into her tea.

She was a young woman with lustrous silver hair, and her tears fell without end, their artificial fluids rolling down her pale cheeks one after another. She was an automaton, so the tears were fake. But her sorrow was as real as could be.

She let out a quiet murmur, her thoughts still with the one who had just left.

“Lady Elisabeth…”

There was no answer.

The Torture Princess had been stroking her head and saying kind things to her mere moments ago, but now she was gone. That was the bitter truth. Hina looked up at the red ceiling and bawled like a baby.

“Hey, Hina. I’m home.”

Suddenly, another voice echoed through the room.

That in and of itself was odd. After all, the room was completely sequestered from the outside world. It had no windows. It had no doors. It was distant from everything. Nobody could leave it. And nobody could come in. It was almost like a graveyard. Or perhaps a prison.

And in that place, that place where nobody ought to be

“Welcome back, Master Kaito.”

Hina dried her tears

and greeted her beloved husband as though it were the most natural thing in the world.

*

“Welcome back, Captain Elisabeth!”

“Welcome back, Madam Elisabeth!”

The chorus of voices all blended together. Standing before Elisabeth were her Peace Brigade subordinates, all lined up in a row.

Elisabeth was so surprised she froze up.

At the moment, she was at Vyadryavka’s primary residence.

She had come there after accepting his invitation, but upon her arrival, she found herself greeted by a number of people she knew.

Whatever she’d been expecting, that certainly hadn’t been it.

Just like Vyade's manor, the building was crafted from stone, and its walls and ceilings were decorated with all manner of live ivy, flowers, and embroidered tapestries. Each member of the imperial family had a unique insignia that reflected their personality, and Vyadryavka's was an elaborate design that incorporated grapes, two panthers, and three species of ivy.

In short, the halls were finely adorned, a fact well accentuated by the slanted rays of golden light streaming in from outside.

And amid all that decor, there was a full lineup of familiar rugged faces.

To put it mildly, Elisabeth had no idea what to make of it.

She leaned over to Lute, beside her, and quietly asked him to fill her in.

"Wait… After the tragedy with Vyade Ula Forstlast, her Peace Brigade was reassigned to the World Tree to protect visiting dignitaries…was it not?"

"Well, whenever I mention you to them, they always talk about how much they miss you…"

"This was your doing, then?"

"As you can see, I brought them all here to Lord Vyadryavka Ula Forstlast's manor."

"*All* of them?! This is absurd! Think of all the trouble this must be causing!"

Her voice still quiet, Elisabeth fired off a sharp rebuke. She may have been the Torture Princess, but she was also their captain, and it was her job to speak up when her subordinates were out of line. However, the culprits in question were collectively all smiles and grins. Given how calm they all seemed, she could only surmise that they'd obtained the necessary permissions to come. In fact, their whole ambience was so terrifyingly welcoming that even the Torture Princess was powerless before its might.

Elisabeth spoke in a strained tone.

"…Er, erm…I'm back?"

"Welcome home, Captain! Excellent work out there!"

Her men spoke in unison, their heels all perfectly lined up.

Elisabeth tilted her head, just as flummoxed as before. It hardly seemed like an appropriate response. Not only was she currently on the run from the humans, but this wasn't even her castle. Welcoming her home hardly made any sense whatsoever. Beside her, though, Vlad puffed up his chest with satisfaction.

"Ah, what a delightful reception. I'm back, too."

"I'm sorry, but I don't think anyone was talking to you."

This time, the reply came from just one of her subordinates, a dog-headed beastman who was quite proud of his short black-and-white-spotted fur. Although he had panicked during the raid on the second imperial princess's residence, he was generally hailed for his composed temperament, and his attitude toward Vlad was as cold as ice.

Vlad replied with a malevolent grin. “Heh-heh-heh. You have nerve, I’ll give you that.” However, the brewing tension was nipped in the bud by Elisabeth’s subordinates lugging over a heavy package.

The package in question was a basket woven from vegetable fiber, and its interior was loaded with thick cloth.

Elisabeth tilted her head to the side yet again. Lute’s ears perked up.

“Oh, would you rather start with a bath, then?”

“Lute…I want you to take a moment and think about what you just said. A single moment, if you would. Just one.”

That was enough to give even Elisabeth pause. Why in the world would she want to take a bath?

Sure, Vyadryavka wasn’t there at the moment.

He had sought out Elisabeth after hearing Lute’s report and advice, but according to him, he had put off a prior arrangement to do so. It must have been rather important, as he left immediately after inviting her.

His fur was practically standing on end… What could it be?

Because of that, Elisabeth was hardly in any sort of mood for relaxation. However, Lute seemed earnestly surprised by her response. The Peace Brigade’s members were many things, but blessed with social awareness was not one of them.

Upon seeing her reaction, a sheep-headed subordinate of hers raised his hand and spoke, his voice brimming with confidence.

“Ah, right you are! Forgive us for being so insensitive, Captain. We all know how much you love to eat, so we should have known that you’d want to have dinner first!”

“Once things settle down, remind me to dock your pay for disrespecting a superior.”

Elisabeth’s tone made it clear she was being quite serious.

The sheepman leaped back with shock. “No!”

Elisabeth shook her head in exasperation. *Is there* anyone *around here with a lick of common sense?* Then she felt a soft tap on her shoulder. She turned, only to have her eyes go wide when she was greeted by yet another familiar face.

It was a goat-headed beastwoman with intelligent eyes. She was a healer who worked at the World Tree as well as Lute’s beloved wife.

“Why, Ain, it’s you. I hadn’t imagined even you would be here.”

“Lute told me about what happened and about the injury you suffered. I finished my work quickly today so I could come. Now, let’s see what we’re dealing with. Come, come—be quick about it.”

“Wait, stop, there’s no need to— Someone help me!”

Ain was a preeminent healer, but her methods were forceful to say the least. Elisabeth’s men knew just how terrifying she could be…and they also knew better than to get in her way.

Tragically, that meant there was nobody to stop Ain from capturing Elisabeth. She unraveled Elisabeth’s bandage without letting her get so

much as a word in edgewise, exposing her smooth shoulder. Ain narrowed her eyes as she looked the wound over. Then, clearly satisfied, she let Elisabeth go. The moment Elisabeth got free, she leaped backward with a feline hiss.

Ain gave her a composed nod.

"It's not bad. Despite how ugly the wound is, it's healing surprisingly well. By tomorrow, there won't be so much as a scar. One thing I can't abide, though, is how *dreadfully* that bandage was wound. That said, it's about what I would expect from a skilled mage overly used to relying on their magic. Did you bind it yourself?"

"Nay, not I! Although… A skilled mage, you say…?"

Elisabeth trailed off as she sank into thought. That cloth from before fluttered through her mind and then faded back into the darkness. She wasn't certain if *he* had been able to use magic, but she still couldn't think of anyone else who might fit.

Sensing that Elisabeth was preoccupied, Ain turned to go. She certainly wasn't boorish enough to meddle in other people's business. Suddenly, though, she turned back and spoke in a sharp tone.

"The bath I've prepared for you is highly medicinal. I expect you to take it."

"…Yes, *Doctor*."

Elisabeth raised her hands in defeat.

And with that, her men carried off the basket, wagging their tails as they went.

*

Regular bathing wasn't really a part of the beastfolk custom.

However, what they lacked in quantity they made up in quality, and noble beastfolk would generally use large, public baths filled with flowers and fragrant herbs.

The room Elisabeth now found herself soaking in was no exception. Red flower petals were even strewn glamorously across the water's surface. It was a wholly unnecessary flourish and one she suspected had been added for her benefit.

After her bath, a lady-in-waiting led Elisabeth to her room.

The beastfolk held nature in high regard, as evidenced by the vegetation adorning the guest room's stone walls. After they first learned to use fire, their early attempts at constructing buildings suitable for their climate led them to develop a technique where they combined stone with various other materials. The room Elisabeth occupied was simply another one of the fruits of that technique. Everything about it, from its sunlight-accommodating windows and hay-stuffed mattress to the carpets on its floor, were the exact same as they'd been in Vyade's guest room.

Elisabeth let out a small sigh. She was feeling a most uncharacteristic emotion.

However, her time working for Vyade had by no means been short.

Not even she could escape nostalgia's pangs.

…But now she is dead.

The Wise Wolf was gone.

And even Elisabeth could tell how much their master's death was affecting her men. They were putting on brave faces, but it was taking all they had to do so.

Valisisa Ula Forstlast had also been slain, but her subordinates were taking her death a little differently. After all, the Dynast's men were a group of battle-hardened soldiers, and they were no strangers to loss.

For them, not being able to settle the score with her killer was eating away at them day after day. Elisabeth had been hearing about their frustration for some time.

'Twould seem Vyadryavka is keeping in close contact with their commanding officers.

Earlier, Elisabeth had spotted one of them in the hallway. He'd had a dangerous look in his eyes, and his hand had been resting on his sword's handle. Even outside of battle, Valisisa's men were making no efforts to hide the fury bubbling up inside them.

Embers of conflict were smoldering even there.

Elisabeth shook her head. She sat down on the bed and flopped backward without so much as turning around.

Then she took a look at the bandage she was carrying. She had tried analyzing it on the off chance she'd find something, but it really was just an ordinary piece of cloth.

In fact, there weren't even residual traces of mana on it. In terms of identifying its owner, it was utterly useless to her, and yet something about it felt inexplicably familiar. She could have sworn she'd never seen it before, but it felt nostalgic to her all the same.

She squeezed the cloth strip tight, as though she were squeezing a hand.

"…If you let your guard down in a situation like this, you might well end up dead, you know. What is it that commands your attention so, O daughter of mine?"

"Well, I was just musing on how wretched a man would have to be to barge in on a woman he ostensibly calls his daughter. What the hell are you doing in here?!"

As Elisabeth shouted, she magically hardened her pillow and hurled it at Vlad for his troubles. He took a step back and raised his hands in a show of surrender.

"Worry not—even compared to my old friend the Grand King, your build is too modest by half. There's no need for *that* particular type of concern, I'm merely being considerate of my daughter's— Okay, well, see now, that one would have actually killed me! Ha-ha!"

With a laugh, Vlad sidestepped the guillotine rushing down on him from overhead. However, that left him unable to react to the elliptical hole that opened under his feet, and he disappeared into it so quickly it was like he'd never been there at all.

That was thanks to the torture device Elisabeth had used to create a space under the floor.

Death Row Cell had no windows. It had no doors. *'Tis perfect for giving him time to reflect on his actions.* She shrugged, then sat back down on the bed.

Right when she was about to get comfortable, though, Vlad's voice echoed up from within his confinement.

"Hey, daughter of mine, would you be so kind as to let me out? The floor's a little too hard to get any decent sleep in here."

"The fact that you immediately tried lying down and sleeping is impressive, in its own way. I think you're fine just where you are."

"Ah, how the rebellious phase drags on… I will say this, though."

Vlad paused for a few seconds. With his echoey words gone, only silence remained.

When he spoke again, his voice was far more earnest than she'd expected.

"When I said you could die if you let your guard down, I was being serious. I really am worried about you."

There was nothing quite so ominous as a jester removing his makeup.

Elisabeth let out a small exhale.

She offered no reply to Vlad's message of concern. Instead, she merely closed off the hole. If Vlad got bored, he could always just break the spell to escape. She never intended the cell to actually hold him.

Elisabeth then spread her arms wide and flopped backward for the second time. For some reason, she was dead tired. She slowly closed her eyes and gave herself over to the drowsiness. All of a sudden, though, her eyes snapped back open.

At the same time, a knock echoed out from the door.

Elisabeth succinctly gave them permission to come in.

"Enter."

"Pardon me, Madam Elisabeth."

Lute did as instructed, then saluted as he gave his message.

"Lord Vyadryavka Ula Forstlast has returned."

*

"I must say, I was shocked when Ain told me she was pregnant."

As the two of them headed to see Vyadryavka, Lute suddenly broached the subject.

He'd clearly been wanting to talk about it for some time.

Now joined by the sound of his voice, their footsteps echoed through the wide hallway.

“It’s taken a long time, but we’ve finally been granted the greatest blessing a person can receive. I can hardly even begin to describe how happy I am. But at the same time…I feel like I just don’t know anymore.”

Lute murmured quickly, practically speaking to himself. He probably wasn’t looking for any sort of response yet, so Elisabeth continued listening to him in silence. Instead, she glanced around the hallway.

The sun had already set, and their surroundings were dim. Desert lilies bloomed a brilliant white against the still darkness. A gift from the demi-humans, no doubt. As the two of them strode on, the flowers receded behind them.

Now there was nothing much to see at all, and Lute continued.

“If my son or daughter were taken hostage, would I truly be able to make the right decision? What would I be willing to sacrifice, and what would I cling tight to?”

“…Hmm.”

“Oh, what am I saying? That’s no way for a vice-captain to talk! Ha-ha, don’t mind me. I meant nothing by it.”

Lute laughed, but it came out raw and forced, and his tail was drooping. Elisabeth knew exactly what had given rise to his worries.

She turned her thoughts to what Aguina Elephabred said to them back in the demi-human lands.

“Of course. No amount of grieving, boasting, laughing, or crying will change who I am or what I need to do. *Why* not *be brazen about it, then? And also, Sir Lute, back to my original topic…*

“My son and his family live in that settlement.”

He betrayed everything, became an enemy of the world. ’Tis only reasonable he be denounced and despised by all. And yet…

He never betrayed his family, nor did he betray his race. Depending on how history played out, he might well be remembered as a hero. However, he could just as easily be remembered as a laughingstock of a fool, with people coming to mock even his grave.

But either way, his wife would take pride in what he did.

And even so, she sold him out to protect her son.

Each and every person has different things they hold precious.

Or as someone once put it, “In their heart of hearts, everyone has just one thing that truly matters to them.” No two scales ever tilted quite the same way.

Upon remembering that fact, Elisabeth opened her mouth and spoke.

“Justice takes a different form for everyone. All you can do is follow a path that shan’t leave you with regrets. If you become my enemy, I shall strike you down, and if I become yours, you shall strike me down in turn. That’s all there is to it. But know that yours is a blade I trust.”

Lute stopped in his tracks and looked at her in shock.

Beastfolk expressions were difficult to read, but in that moment, Elisabeth was keenly reminded how that barrier could be overcome with familiarity and experience. She continued conveying her sentiments to her subordinate.

"You're an honest man, and you were a good friend to Kaito Sena. You've earned that trust well."

Elisabeth said the words as though she were stating the obvious. This time, it was Lute's turn to open his mouth. His jaw dropped as he stared at Elisabeth in surprise. A good few moments passed before he shook his head to compose himself.

With a loud *click*, he snapped his heels together and bowed deep.

"I fear you think too much of me, but it is an honor nonetheless."

"Do I? I thought it a rather deserved assessment myself."

"…You know, Madam Elisabeth, you really are the best captain a man could ever ask for."

"Hmm? I don't see how you got that from anything I just said."

Elisabeth raised an eyebrow. All she had done was give voice to her honest thoughts.

Lute raised his head with a terribly serious look in his eyes. He started to say something but stopped and shook his head.

"No disrespect meant, but…," he prefaced his reply, "…that's something you'll have to figure out for yourself someday, Madam Elisabeth."

"…You're a strict one, aren't you?"

As the response sprang naturally from her mouth, Elisabeth thought back.

Long ago, in a rattling carriage, Hina had told her the exact same thing.

"That's something you'll have to figure out for yourself someday, Lady Elisabeth. It wouldn't mean anything if I just told you," she had said with a finger playfully raised in front of her lips. Elisabeth had never gotten a clear answer to Hina's question from that day, and the chance to check her guesses had now been lost to her.

Elisabeth closed her eyes for a few short seconds, then resumed her stride.

At some point, the golden sunbeams lighting the corridor
had been overtaken and replaced by silver moonbeams
whose hue so matched the hair of a person she held most dear.

*

The two of them continued briskly down the corridor.

Eventually, they could hear a voice off in the distance. Someone was angrily shouting. However, there was no sign that anyone had bumped into them, nor did it seem to be directed at the lady-in-waiting standing outside the entrance. In fact, it didn't seem to be directed at anyone else at all.

Those were the shouts of a man possessed. Elisabeth raised an eyebrow.

Something was clearly up.

Soon, the foyer came into view, and with it, the shouter pacing agitatedly around it.

“Again, *again* with this! It’s okay, though, I still got a bite. I still got permission for my audience tomorrow. I’ll do it…I’ll *do it*, dammit! I’ll get those three to take action! No matter what it takes, even if it costs me my life! No matter what it takes! I—ah, Madam Elisabeth.”

Suddenly, Vyadryavka whirled around. His white wolf cloak swayed as he gave her an almost intoxicated bow. He was riled up and dead tired, and his body smelled faintly of blood.

Elisabeth furrowed her brow, wondering what the hell he had been up to. As far as she could tell, though, he wasn’t wounded, nor did he appear to have anyone else’s blood on him, either. It seemed unlikely he had just come from a fight.

But what, then?

“Your wound is healed, I hope?” he asked. “…I do apologize, by the way, for inviting you and then taking off so suddenly.”

“…Goodness, your voice is so hoarse I can barely understand you.”

“Ah, that… Ha-ha, I may have overused my throat a bit, yes. No need to worry about me, though.”

That was the answer—the bloody scent was coming from inside his mouth. He must really have run his throat ragged.

Elisabeth replied with silence. Lute did the same. Talking to Vyadryavka now would accomplish little, as his heart was clearly elsewhere. After bowing once more, he began walking again. Several ladies-in-waiting hurriedly followed after him.

As he scratched at his brow, he started muttering.

“That’s right… It’s unforgivable. Unforgivable. I will have my revenge. No matter what it takes. No matter what it takes. No matter what it takes.”

Elisabeth could see full well that the look in his eyes was the same as in Valisisa’s soldiers’.

Just like them, Vyadryavka was making no effort to hide the intense fury he felt toward his enemies.

Once again, Elisabeth realized something.

Ah. How right you are, Vlad.

She really might end up dead if she let her guard down.

Things had been peaceful that day, but even that calm was nothing more than a fleeting illusion. The tranquility was but an intermission in the farce. And before long, the show would begin again to cheers and thunderous applause.

When that happened, those scant peaceful hours would vanish like they’d never been there.

And what’s more, she was sure

that this would be the play’s final intermission.

7
The Kings' Advent

Fremd Torturchen

7
The Kings' Advent

The room

was as red as always

and the pieces atop its chessboard were in utter disarray. However, things around the simple desk were quiet.

At it, two people sat across from each other.

Steam wafted up from their freshly brewed cups of tea, and there was a plate adorned with a small pile of cookies.

Time passed peacefully there. They shared no conversation, although they did look up and nod from time to time to set the other's mind at ease. They both rested one hand by the chessboard, each squeezing the other's tight.

However, that peaceful time of theirs soon came to an abrupt end.

The intermission was over.

Suddenly, the chessboard shook.

It rattled ever louder, and its surface began rumbling. It was as though the earth itself was roaring.

Kaito Sena leaned forward. From there, he could see the board's tumultuous change in its entirety.

Something was appearing on it.

Kaito's eyes went wide.

Then, in a low voice, he spoke.

"…Here they come."

*

"My esteemed colleagues, I thank you all for coming here once again. Now, without further ado, let us be seated!"

A dignified voice rang out over the large round table.

Yet again, they were gathered at the underground conference room beneath the World Tree.

A few days had passed since Elisabeth accepted the first imperial prince's invitation.

Sensing that the time was upon them, Vyadryavka Ula Forstlast had summoned the three races' representatives together. However, the dignitaries had problems in their own lands to worry about.

The rebellion hadn't stopped, nor had the massacres. Cold looks lingered in their gazes at Vyadryavka having taken valuable time from them that could be spent dealing with their domestic emergencies. Despite the

reception he was getting, though, the sharply dressed panther-headed beastman merely replied with a calm bow.

Puzzled looks spread across the dignitaries' faces.

The humans and demi-humans were one thing, but not even the lower-ranked members of the beastfolk imperial family understood what was going on.

However, their expressions soon turned to ones of comprehension, each sporting a different shade of it but all possessing it just the same.

"It seems like something's changed." "I wouldn't have expected this, not from someone who's neither the Dynast nor the Wise Wolf." "Still, though, that confidence of his doesn't seem baseless." "And confidence is often rooted in strength." "From money, from armed might, from powerful backing." "Or sometimes..." "Well, let's just hope it isn't madness or delusion." "What is it he decided? What is it he obtained?"

In any case, I imagine that's what most of them are thinking.

Elisabeth glanced around at the representatives and nodded. Everyone there was highly capable, and together, they formed the nucleus of society. They were not idiots. Unwittingly, she had come to much of the same conclusion that Kaito Sena once had.

With a flourish, Vyadryavka raised his arm out to the side. A blue ring gleamed on his middle finger.

"Now, I know you're all busy people, which is why I should start with an apology. The reason I called you here today was to inform you of events that have already been set in motion."

A wave of restlessness swept through the room.

Some people even slammed the table and rose up from their chairs. They were hasty reactions, to be sure, but the situation had everyone on edge. At the moment, high spirits were a scarce commodity. One of Maclaeus's advisers leaned over and whispered something to the Royal Knight beside him. Suddenly, the young king took the initiative, rising to his feet to dissuade anyone from making any rash decisions.

The room went silent.

Perfectly composed, Maclaeus faced Vyadryavka and spoke.

"Would you mind elaborating? Given that you chose to call us here to make this announcement, I assume there was meaning in doing so. *There would have had to have been.* Do I presume rightly, Lord Vyadryavka Ula Forstlast?"

"You do indeed, King Maclaeus Filliana. Now, allow me to say what needs to be said."

The two nobles exchanged a glance from across the pure-white round table.

Elisabeth frowned and thought back to the records she read after the end of days.

That was the same table where Valisisa the Dynast and Kaito Sena the Mad King had played out their battle.

Now Vyadryavka was imitating his older sister as he stood before it. In truth, nothing he was doing or saying was anything but base mimicry. There was a reason he had never made a name for himself while his sisters were still alive—he knew full well just how stunted a vessel he was. And that was precisely why he knew that he needed to become larger than himself.

The situation called for a *dramatic change*.

And to make that happen, the first imperial prince would have to become capable of standing shoulder to shoulder with his sisters.

He holds the Dynast and Wise Wolf in great esteem. And he held particular adoration for the first princess, as I recall…

It was a silly little thing, but the first imperial prince's stance on the Dynast and the Wise Wolf was rooted in simple love.

During her stay at his manor, Vyadryavka had told Elisabeth a story.

"When I was young, I asked Valisisa to teach me how to use a sword, and I got Vyade to patch me up afterward. I couldn't let my subordinates find out, you see. Because of an incident where a member of the imperial family murdered another and tried to pass it off as a tragic dueling accident, we were prohibited from so much as martial training. My sister railed against that restriction, though, saying that one dishonorable half-wit did not a people make as she knocked me off my feet over and over and over. 'You need to be stronger,' she would tell me. 'Weaklings are a disgrace to the imperial family…' And then Vyade would have to come comfort me, telling me that kindness was just as important as strength. Ah, how frustrating those days we shared were and what fun we had!"

…'Tis nigh impossible to tell a man with such sparkling eyes not to base his decisions off something such as that.

When you got right down to it, the mixed-race people started their rebellion for exactly the same reason.

It was the simplest reason imaginable, but it was rooted in a heavy truth.

"Someone they wished was alive had been killed."

That, as always, was what gave rise to the flag called revenge.

Vyadryavka's white wolf fur cloak flapped showily behind him as he began his proclamation.

"Our lands are in chaos, to say nothing of our hearts. And waging a war of attrition is hardly an option, not when we have no idea how much stronger the Fremd Torturchen may yet grow and not when we have no idea what other weapons our foes may have in store. The rebels will bide their time, waiting for us to fall further into disarray, and when they come at us, they will come at us hard. The pressure is on us to act—and to act now. Give me the map!"

When Vyadryavka barked out the order, Vlad gave a scornful laugh from Elisabeth's side.

"Well I see *someone's* being a bit of a taskmaster. Would it kill him to say 'please'?"

Despite his grumbling, though, he snapped his fingers all the same. Azure petals and black darkness swirled up before the round table, etching a large map in midair. There was a red mark on the vast desert that spanned much of its top half.

Vyadryavka slammed his fist into the mark.

“We’ve identified their hiding spot! Right *here*!”

When his hand made contact, the map shattered. A shower of petals cascaded throughout the conference room.

Amid the azure storm, a stir ran through the dignitaries.

Elisabeth frowned. Vyadryavka’s performance was flashy—almost excessively so. However, even though the people there had only seen it for a moment, that coordinate was now etched into their brains. Such was the power of Vlad’s red mark.

Before they had a chance to recover from the shock, the panther-headed beastman went on.

“We have visual confirmation on both Lewis and Alice, as well as a number of demon grandchildren. There can be no doubt that this is the mixed-race forces’ main stronghold—and that now is the time to strike!”

For a moment, the room was cloaked in absolute silence.

Then it was as loud as if a bomb had gone off.

It was a natural reaction. After all, unilaterally deciding to invade should have been completely off the table.

There were people shouting at him for acting out of turn, people calmly trying to point out how dangerous it would be, people complaining that this wasn’t the plan—and they all blended together, echoing through the room like a buzzing swarm of insects. Everyone kept shouting and shouting, trying desperately to be heard in that bee’s nest of a conference room.

Elisabeth gazed at the chaos from the window. What Vyadryavka had done was inelegant, but that wasn’t to say she opposed it.

Endings always come swiftly, like meteors descending.

That speed and fervor were necessary if they wanted to blow everything away. And they had to, for if they didn’t, a calamity would come.

A calamity would come.

To all the people of the land.

That was what they were up against.

“And for that sake, there is but one answer—to take sword in hand, folly as it may be.”

*

During Vyadryavka’s speech, Elisabeth and Vlad weren’t actually present at the World Tree.

Instead, they were on standby at the Sand Queen’s temple over in the demi-human lands.

The two of them gazed down at the proceedings through the window of what Vyadryavka's blue ring was perceiving. The reason they were there was to await the results of the second inspection.

The first inspection—the one on the Sand Queen's corpse—had long been completed.

There had always been a danger that they would run into the human army while conducting their investigation, but as yet, the temple was still quiet.

In all likelihood, they had Maclaeus Filliana to thank for that. He must have kept the information he got from Izabella a secret. Viewed favorably, it was because he wanted to let Elisabeth handle it her way, regardless of whether or not she actually had the right to do so. However, he might just as easily have held back because he was concerned the information itself was a trap.

After all, it was odd how Aguina's wife had been left behind. Her information was such that they had no choice but to look into it. But due to the fact that it was a potentially dangerous trap, the only one he could afford to have go was the Torture Princess. At the end of the day, though, Elisabeth didn't much care what the king's true motive had been.

Either way, it didn't change what she had to do.

As a result of her initial inspection, a new piece of information came to light.

What she had found was an act of blasphemy and utter sacrilege.

It was a teleportation circle, carved atop the Sand Queen's meaty tongue inside her sealed mouth.

Normally, it wasn't possible to teleport out from the Sand Queen's burial chamber. However, that seal didn't extend to the inside of her mouth. Furthermore, it was a place nobody would ever look without knowing to do so ahead of time. After all, who would ever imagine a group containing several prominent demi-humans defiling the Sand Queen's mouth like that?

That would be like the Grave Keeper abandoning her vows or the Butcher forgetting the Saint.

And that was precisely why they picked it.

That was what it meant to betray the world.

However, one question yet remained.

Even if Satisbarina went to the corpse, how would she know where to look? Their working theory was that Aguina's group had fed some of the other purebloods a piece of information that would draw their attention to the Sand Queen's mouth. That way, they wouldn't even realize it was connected to the betrayal, so they would have no reason to bring it up when they were being questioned.

Plus, even if the information did leak, it would be meaningless on its own.

'Tis like a nasty bit of wordplay… And what's more, it's harder to decipher the closer one is to the demi-humans.

From there, Elisabeth had analyzed the teleportation circle and identified its end point. However, she had refrained from activating it.

Running mana through the circle would immediately alert their foes, and sending a familiar or communication device to the site would run a similar risk. Fortunately, though, Elisabeth had a trump card at her disposal that could make the impossible possible.

The Kaiser, apex of the fourteen demons.

If he went, there was little danger he'd be detected. The only problem was convincing him to go, but much to her surprise, he took on the task with surprisingly little resistance. As always, the Kaiser was a fickle beast. Perhaps he was merely tired of waiting on the sidelines.

Thanks to him, they were able to scout the location.

Sure enough, Alice and Lewis were at the pureblood settlement, and they were accompanied by a sizable group of those of mixed race.

With that, their path was clear.

All that remained were the fateful choices.

*

Should they invade or not?

And if so, then when?

How should they coordinate the three races' forces? Should they send the demi-humans in at all?

Who would act as commander?

Vyadryavka's proclamation had been abrupt, to be sure, but that certainly wasn't to say his decision had been thoughtless.

He was doing it to circumvent the array of interconnected problems bubbling just below the surface.

A particular source of concern was the humans. The Torture Princess's flight had given rise to no shortage of scheming and plotting among their ranks, and the longer things drew out, the more people would start weighing their personal ambitions against the risks they carried. Once that happened, even the beastfolk would find themselves forced to start acting more cautiously.

And Vyadryavka had another reason for acting the way he did, too.

His other motive was related to Vyade's final curse.

"Valisisa Ula Forstlast was a precious treasure chosen by the Three Kings of the Forest, as was I. We were royalty, chosen by the Three Kings to serve as special pawns. We were this country's greatest treasures, as well as servants to its people.

"…For those who destroy such treasure, the only fitting punishment is death.

"For such an act is unforgivable. Till the end of days, you shall never be forgiven—and thus, you shall perish here and now."

Those were the Wise Wolf's dying words to Lewis and Alice.

It was widely recognized that the Dynast and Wise Wolf were gifted, even for members of the imperial family. That was precisely whom those of mixed race had stolen from them. And to make matters worse, the demi-humans had shamelessly cast aside their age-old friendship to side with the rebels.

From there, all that remained was a simple equation.

There was no way for them to apologize. Not the slightest chance for atonement. Given those parameters, there was a pretty clear answer. You multiplied hate by resentment, then subtracted those pesky ethics.

Then once they carried out their revenge on the second party, the story would come to an end.

And if that becomes the common understanding of the beastfolk, as it once did for the mixed-race people…

…then even the unmoving would be driven to take action.

On the other side of the window, the chaos was reaching its zenith. Even among the beastfolk, there was no shortage of people calling to proceed with caution. And they weren't even misguided in doing so. With so many uncertainties still at play, there was no one correct option.

With the uproar showing no signs of dying down, Vlad gazed at the proceedings and whispered.

"Now then—time for the main actors to make their advent."

"Our victory is all but assured! Listen…and bear witness!"

The words had scarcely left Vyadryavka's mouth when an earsplitting roar rang out.

However, the sound wave soon eclipsed the range of their perception.

All they could sense of it were the terrible tremors running through the conference room. If anything, though, the fact that it was still quaking despite being silent save for the walls' creaking made it all the more terrifying. Fearing that it was an enemy raid, the knights and soldiers moved to protect their various charges. However, they soon realized that something was amiss.

That noise had come from a beast.

And what's more, the *entire World Tree* was shaking.

Elisabeth's crimson eyes flashed as she murmured.

"I never thought I would live to see the day…"

"It can't be… It can't! Is this really happening?"

Maclaeus, sharp as ever, let out a cry of abject shock. Due to his astonishment, though, his voice ended up betraying his youth. A moment later, several others who were a bit slower on the uptake gasped in disbelief.

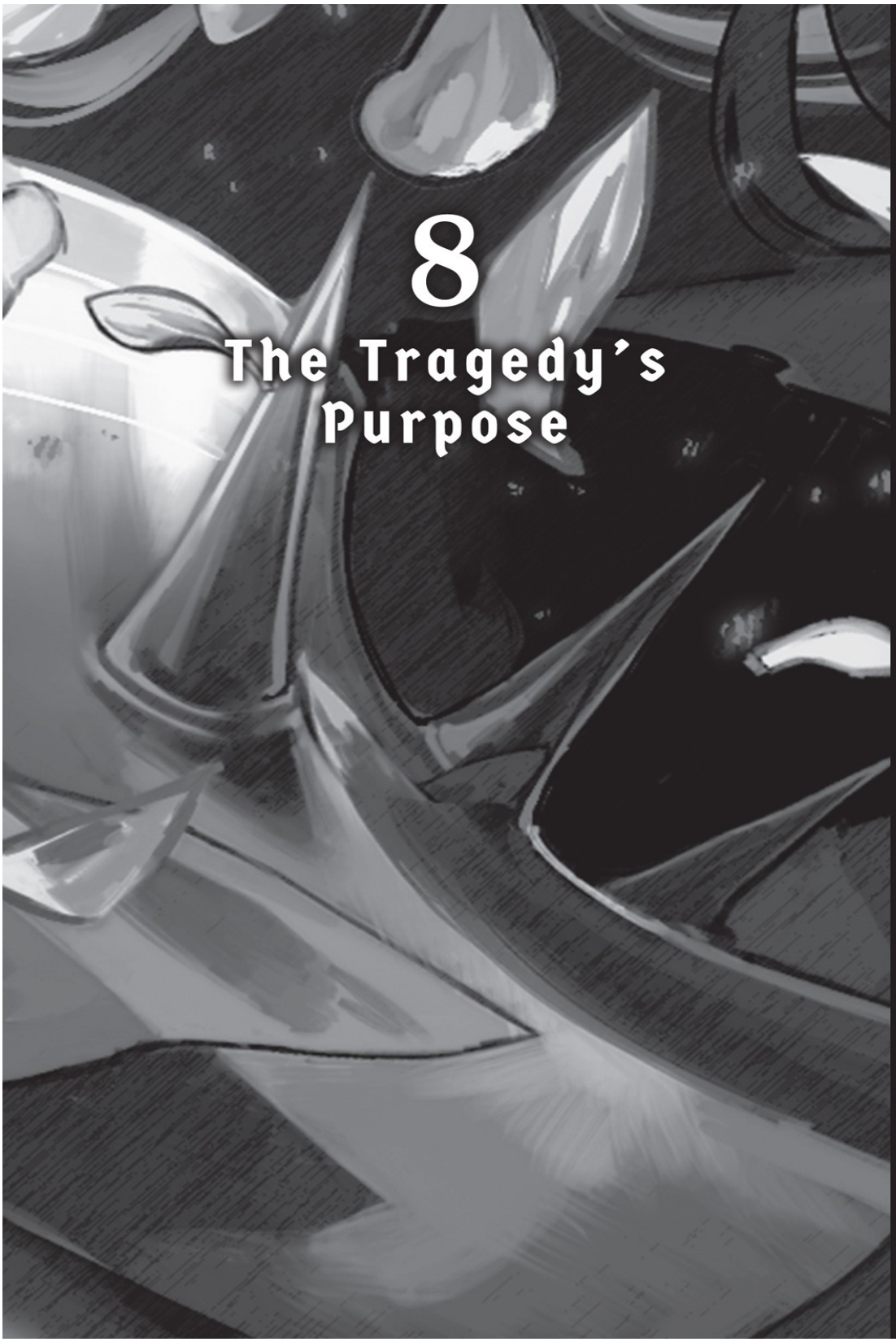
Everyone's gazes were fixed on the panther-headed prince. Vyadryavka nodded. This was what he had run his throat ragged for. This was what he had wrung his tear ducts dry for. This was what he had put his life on the line for. He spread his white wolf fur cloak wide.

Then he made his announcement with the solemn dignity of a priest.

“Yesterday, at long last, we reached an understanding. The Three Kings of the Forest are going to war.”

Due to the murder of their finest royalty and their betrayal at the hands of their compatriots the demi-humans

the Three Kings of the Forest—beings straight out of legend—had been driven to action.



8
The Tragedy's Purpose

8
The Tragedy’s Purpose

“Oh, I simply adore chess!”

A young girl in leather shoes swung her feet back and forth beneath her seat at the tea party.

She laughed, innocent as could be.

The red wall was to her back, and her seat was the one straight across from Kaito’s—on the side of the enemy army. At present, she was fiddling with the chessboard, snatching pieces up and tossing them back down as suited her fancy.

Then three crowned pieces appeared atop the board.

They were much larger than the other pieces, and the girl regarded them with great interest.

“It’s such an odd chess set, what with it having three kings and all! The thing is, see, I don’t know the rules all that well. I just think the little pieces look cute. Did you know that *Through the Looking-Glass* is a story about chess? There’s a Red Queen and a White Queen, you see, and the whole story is about their match!”

The girl threw out her chest with pride, her red eyes gleaming beneath the brim of her oversized hat.

All of a sudden, though, her expression went blank and she spoke in an apathetic murmur.

“…Say, why is it you still think this world will amount to anything?”

“Forget the pointless question—are you sure you should even be here?”

Kaito rested his chin on his hand and answered her question with one of his own. He gazed at the girl with eyes just as emotionless as hers. She dumped a handful of sugar cubes into her cup and puffed up her lips in annoyance as she violently stirred.

“Pshaw, it’s fine. I’m asleep right now! And you see, in my dream, I followed the scent of something familiar from another world. It was like I was chasing after the White Rabbit… I’m a very good girl, you know. You might not know it, but I can do just about anything! But the way you are now, not even I’m any sort of match for you.”

The white ribbons adorning the girl’s—Alice’s—hat slumped down. Her emotions were as bombastic as they were varied. As the Mad King and Fremd Torturchen continued their Mad Tea Party, Alice spoke in the saddest of tones.

“Once I wake up, I’ll forget that any of this happened. It’s better for you that way, right? …But see, that’s how dreams really ought to be. You can’t

keep your memories from Wonderland once you go back. And Father said the same thing… ‘Nightmares are best forgotten,’ he told me. He said that he feels sorry for me because I always cry so horribly in my sleep.”

But what about this?

With a small murmur, Alice tilted her cup over. Its red contents spilled out onto the board, and sugar cubes went tumbling and knocked pieces over. However, the maid didn’t scold her for her rudeness. Hina merely stood silently by her husband’s side.

Eventually, Alice seemed satisfied. She gave a big nod.

“Well, I suppose either’s fine! But since I’m here and all, I may as well wish for it to be a good one—oh, but the pieces have started moving, so I’m going to be woken up. That’s quite a shame.”

Alice poked at the three massive pieces. Each crowned piece bore the form of an intersex beast. One was an ancient wolf, another was a white deer, and the final one was a colossal hawk. As they trampled over her army, Alice spoke in a quiet, singsong voice.

“Poor Kaito Sena. Poor Elisabeth. Poor, poor everyone. Someday, you’re all going to break.”

Then a loud *crash* echoed. Her cup had fallen down.

Alice was gone. All that remained was the crimson-soaked chessboard—

—and the high-pitched echo of her laughter.

*

The sound of flesh burning filled the air, punctuated by the snapping of bones.

Somewhere, someone was being burned.

And off in the distance, dragon bones were being crushed underfoot.

The earth was searing hot, and the sky was choked with the black of smoke and ash.

Great roars rocked the air. The Three Kings were laying out their decree: Burn the earth. Burn the trees. Burn every last blade of grass from the ground.

Many of our foes will perish. For that is the price their betrayal commands.

Another horrible tremor wracked the ground. Buildings as far as the eye could see shuddered and collapsed into splinters.

For a brief moment, a monstrous silhouette appeared amid the burning buildings, and a mixed-race mage desperately firing off spells found himself snatched up by a colossal wolf paw. He screamed and begged for mercy but vanished into the beast’s maw all the same.

A horrible, graphic noise sounded out, and blood cascaded down like rain.

With a *thump*, a single arm fell back to the ground.

It felt like watching the world end. A man garbed in black, standing still in the middle of the chaos, let out a low murmur.

“‘A calamity cometh. A calamity cometh. To all the people of the land. The coming messenger aims to blow the bugle of the end.’ Although, looking at this, perhaps they already have.”

“Still thy tongue, Vlad. And what are you standing out in the open so brazenly for? Get back here.”

Elisabeth wrenched Vlad back by his collar.

Then she continued dragging him as she proceeded down the side alley. Vlad, in a surprising show of obedience, didn’t put up a fight. The settlement made copious use of the surrounding dragon bones in its construction, and the upcoming street corner was fashioned out of one such skeleton.

As she quietly slipped through its open rib cage, Elisabeth spoke.

“The front lines are no place for us. Our task lies in the shadows.”

Meanwhile, demon grandchildren with misshapen wings flew over the main drag.

Weaving over the labyrinthine streets, they made for the Three Kings of the Forest like arrows. The air crackled with the sound of their bizarre laughter. However, one sweep of the Three Kings' tails was enough to crush them all like flies.

They were outmatched, plain and simple.

Elisabeth's thoughts turned as she watched their entrails soar through the air.

The gulf in strength and size is simply too vast… Weapons designed to kill people are meaningless against the Three Kings. However, not even an army of summoned beasts would be equal to the task. There are scant few who could mount a resistance against a weapon capable of leveling a nation.

The Three Kings of the Forest mowed down everything in their path as they made their advance.

Behind them, the beastfolk and human soldiers trampled over the broken corpses of demi-humans, mixed-race people, and buildings.

Their armor clanked, and their disorderly footsteps shook the ground as their chaotic advance continued. By and large, the invasion was a complete rout. Cries of successful conquest rose up from the various demon research facilities that had been set up in the underground shelters. Although there were still some areas left to subdue, it had all gone so anticlimactically it hardly even felt like a victory.

The conference had taken place just a few short hours ago.

Now the dragon bone settlement was a living hellscape.

*

Once the Three Kings of the Forest got moving, the situation developed at a breakneck pace.

It was like a boulder rolling down a hill.

With no way to stop the Three Kings' march, the smaller beings had no choice but to fall in line so as not to be left behind. However, things ended up going surprisingly smoothly.

Maclaeus was able to quickly identify the best course of action, and the paladins and Royal Knights both went along with it.

They had already known that a battle with the mixed-race people was imminent, so for them, it was just a matter of assembling as much of their army as possible and using the castle's mages to teleport it so they could join up with the beastfolk.

Meanwhile, the beastfolk's decision pulled double duty by forcibly removing the demi-human dignitaries from play.

In short, the conference had also served as a trap.

As for Vyadryavka, his forces were a hodgepodge consisting of the private armies of the late Dynast and other high-ranking members of the imperial family. The rest of the imperial family's soldiers were assigned to stand guard over the demi-human officials. Then Vyadryavka used the majority of the mage blood the beastfolk had painstakingly collected over generations to teleport both the army and the Three Kings of the Forest as close to the settlement as possible. It was a drastic move, but it got the job done.

Once they got close, the mixed-race people sensed their presence, but by then, they had no time to flee. It was like trying to take cover from a tsunami or volcanic eruption with no advance warning.

As it turned out, trying to escape a calamity was easier said than done.

And that was truly the term that described what struck the pureblood settlement.

The demi-human lands were home to golden sand, harsh winds, burning liquids, and myriad minerals mass-produced in the Dragons' Graveyard. Of the various graveyards, the pureblood settlement was located in the one with the least raw mineral ore and where the dragon bones were all largely in their original states. As a result, the bleached bone surrounding the settlement cloaked it in the constant reek of death.

Despite that, though, the townscape itself was fairly posh. Its sandstone houses were decorated with jewel-and-metal charms, hand-sewn sunshades, and various succulents. There was also a temple deep within the settlement, albeit a fair shake smaller than the real one, and the path leading to it was dyed vermilion. They had done their best to leave the dragon bones as is and work around them, so the paths were intricate and winding, but all in all, the settlement was laid out in much the same way as the demi-human first sector.

Due to the increased population from those of mixed race, it was almost like a small nation.

Now, though, most of it had been obliterated.

The Three Kings' march was destruction incarnate—a wave of pure, unbridled chaos.

Everything they touched got demolished and consumed in their unforgiving wake.

Against them, the very concept of order shattered and fell.

Seeing them in action made Elisabeth keenly aware of why they had so obstinately refused to take the stage up until then.

They were simply too powerful.

'Twould make a right mess of things, having power incarnate dictating national policy.

That was probably why they had refrained from acting during the end of days, too.

If they had made an appearance back then, it would have slowly but surely shifted the world's power balance toward the three of them. They

were creatures of a bygone era, and they respected modern society too much to let that happen. That was why they only acted through the imperial family and stuck largely to their role as spectators.

Even as more and more of the world's power balance shifted toward the humans, the Three Kings of the Forest had remained steadfast in their nonintervention.

And if natural selection had slowly taken its course, they would probably have stayed that way.

But then their beloved children were destroyed by an act that fell outside of that natural course.

And what's more, a brother of the fallen shed tears and lifeblood to make a desperate plea to them.

"Please grant us your strength," he begged. "Please, bless us with your compassion."

So now they were making a once-in-a-lifetime march.

The colossal hawk flapped its wings, shattering the bones that surrounded the settlement. The white deer hooves trampled houses and people alike. And the ancient wolf's fangs mowed down the survivors. Their foes tried to resist with all manner of weapons and magic, but the Three Kings' sheer power crushed them one and all.

Many of the corpses they left in their wake were reduced to little more than piles of blood and viscera. For others, nothing remained but a single arm or leg.

Several times now, Elisabeth had tried to look up at the Three Kings as they conducted their brutal savageries.

Even so, she had yet to grasp their full forms.

There were countless bits and fragments burned into her retinas—sleek fur, majestic wings, an array of udders, limbs that stretched into the sky, and bestial eyes that looked like full moons—but she couldn't reconcile them into cohesive wholes.

Her brain simply refused to comprehend the Three Kings. All she could tell was that they were mighty, they were beautiful, and they were terrifying.

They, too, were beings that superseded human comprehension.

Their march, in comparison, almost called to mind a parade—it was lavish and majestic and overwhelming. It was like something that would be thrown to celebrate a king's return. Everything about it was so ludicrously beyond the scope the smaller beings operated at.

A dispassionate thought crossed Elisabeth's mind.

This is no battle.

The beastfolk were done grieving. This was their anger given form.

Your deeds are as haughty as they are heinous, the Three Kings howled.

As such, it falls on us to lop off your sinful heads. It falls on us to spill rivers of your blood, stack mountains of your corpses, and reduce you all to ash.

Ironically, it was the same message as the mixed-race proclamation.

For in the end, that was what revenge boiled down to.

*

The rebel army had been well prepared to defend themselves, even against a fairly sizable force. However, they hadn't planned for the Three Kings' march. Not even the humans and beastfolk had.

As such, the frontal assault served as a surprise attack as well, and the one-sided domination continued.

As Elisabeth dashed deeper into the hellscape, her gaze lingered for a moment.

She saw Lute standing between two leveled buildings. The copper-furred wolfman was barking orders at his subordinates to look for someone. Their eyes met. She nodded at him, leaving the rest in his hands.

Amid the fire and ash and smoke, Lute straightened his back and gave her a deep bow.

Elisabeth set off again.

Most of the mixed-race people will die here and now. The traitorous demi-humans as well.

That was why the Peace Brigade—her subordinates—were in charge of a different mission than the rest of the army.

Their task was to locate and protect Satisbarina's son, and they had official approval from the Three Kings of the Forest to do so. The Three Kings were kings before they were beasts, and they knew full well the ripple effect that breaking an oath with a prisoner of war could have on society. However, there was still no guarantee their mission would end in success.

For one, the late Dynast Valisisa's private army was out for blood, and there was a genuine risk they would end up slaughtering the hostage residents along with their foes. Almost all the civilians killed by swords had been downed by their hands. Such was the depth of their rage and sorrow and such was the scale of their loss. And with how chaotic things were, there was no stopping them.

Any attempt to control the soldiers scattered across the settlement would be an uphill battle at best.

Off in the distance, young children could be heard screaming.

As Elisabeth charged on, her expression unchanging, her thoughts turned once more.

Did Satisbarina know this would happen?

There was but one answer.

She did.

She might have seemed a dullard, but she was sharp as a knife, and it was difficult to imagine her harboring any naive illusions about how things would play out. She must have foreseen the tragedy that awaited, yet even

so, she had taken the best option available to her and gambled everything on saving her son.

For the sake of her love, she was willing to let everyone else die.

And Elisabeth was the one who'd taken advantage of that fact.

This particular hell had the two Suffering Women to thank for its creation.

From beside Elisabeth, an easygoing voice cut through her reverie.

"You know, my precious, you get hung up over the oddest things. I can't imagine the screams rest easy in your ears, but it's a *little late for that*, no? If anything, you should consider them a badge of honor. Of all the tragedies you've caused as the Torture Princess, at least this one might pave the way for a brighter future."

"Silence, Vlad. I know not if you're trying to praise me or get a rise out of me, but in either case, I don't care for it one bit."

"Oh, I don't doubt it. And if I'm being quite honest, my aim lay with both in equal measure! Your reactions are so adorable; I really just can't get enough of them."

Elisabeth gave Vlad's response a sharp click of the tongue. Oddly, Vlad replied with a smile. There was something really quite unsettling about it, but before Elisabeth had a chance to figure out what seemed so off, a scream cut through the air, and the wall to their left came crumbling down.

Elisabeth raced on, dodging the rain of debris and kicking chunks of rubble aside.

Suddenly, she noticed a dark figure the size of a calf running alongside her in the sandy cloud. There could be little doubt that *he* was enjoying the tragedy more than anyone else. The Kaiser spoke, laughing all the while in a voice that sounded almost human.

"Ah, hell. Hell! Where everything burns and festers and crumbles and dies. Where are you off to in such a hurry amid all this death?"

"I said it not moments ago—we have a task to fulfill in the shadows."

"My, how underhanded. What task is that?"

Elisabeth responded to the Kaiser by silently glaring forward. For she knew.

There were two people, and two people alone, capable of turning the tables on this despair-inducing situation.

The Fremd Torturchen Alice Carroll and Lewis.

And hunting smaller beings like them was a job for rats.

As such, Elisabeth voiced her and Vlad's mission aloud.

"'Tis simple—kill Alice and Lewis."

The two of them needed to be killed.

That was the price

of peace.

*

To. Fro. Chitter. Chatter.

There were voices.

Throngs of people sobbing and screaming and trembling. Someone was loudly crying out with pride, “Victory is ours!” Someone else lamented their defeat, their tone that of a person dashing through a field with deranged abandon and laughing their head off. “We’re doomed; it’s all over.”

And there, in that place that seemed halfway between a nightmare and reality, a young girl spoke.

“Come now, let’s be good girls and sing a song.

“Humpty Dumpty sat on a wall! Humpty Dumpty had a great fall!

“All the king’s horses and all the king’s men couldn’t put Humpty together again.”

But what is it that truly can’t be put together again?

Right as the thought began tickling Elisabeth’s brain, the girl stopped singing. She slowly spun to face her.

The white, rabbit-ear-like ribbons attached to her oversized hat swayed from side to side. It was then that Elisabeth realized the girl was grinning and clutching the hem of her dress. She gave it a vigorous flourish.

Desert lilies went fluttering up through the air. They were in the temple courtyard, and the girl had been picking flowers.

That was what she’d been doing amid the destruction and the slaughter.

Just like she had once before, Alice bent a knee.

“Welcome, Elisabeth. Welcome to Wonderland.”

With that, Alice gave her an elegant curtsy, and her white hair flopped adorably about. Although their surroundings had been reduced to a grim hellscape, the way Alice faced her was much the same as ever.

Things were quiet in the temple, but red light lapped at the tops of courtyard walls. The settlement was burning, and every so often, sparks would come tumbling down. In time, the temple would go up in flames, too.

Yet even so, Alice was waiting inside it without so much as trying to hide. Elisabeth nodded.

She’d had a feeling this was how it would go.

Fleeing and hiding weren’t exactly Alice’s style.

Alice spread her arms wide as though gesturing at the conflagration outside. She began turning in circles.

“Say, Elisabeth. Did you do this?”

“Aye, that I did. ’Twas I who laid the groundwork, and ’twas I who lit the fuse. What of it?”

“Ah, I knew it! Oh, that’s so sad. Poor, poor Elisabeth.”

Elisabeth raised an eyebrow. Surely it was the mixed-race people and demi-humans who deserved Alice’s pity, not her. She certainly didn’t feel poor. However, Alice just kept going, spinning all the while.

“Poor Elisabeth. Poor Kaito Sena. Poor, poor everyone. Someday, you’re all going to break.”

What did Kaito Sena have to do with anything?

Right as Elisabeth was about to voice that question, though, another voice cut in.

“Ah, Elisabeth Le Fanu… You’re here already?”

Lewis strode out from inside the temple proper, calling out to her as one would a friend.

Much to her surprise, he seemed completely composed.

Most of his comrades had been consumed, and his experiments had gone up in flames. However, the light that burned in his one unmasked eye was as calm as ever. And as always, there was an indescribable sadness about him.

Elisabeth raised an arm to gesture at the burning settlement.

“Behold the grim spectacle. Would you still call me weak? Would you accuse me of having had everything taken from me? And one other thing. Why do you yet speak to me with such confounding familiarity?”

“Valid questions. Allow me to make one amendment, though. You *are* weak. But it’s not a term meant for people like you. No…perhaps it never was.”

Lewis spoke quietly, as though talking mostly to himself. He gave his head a small shake.

Elisabeth glared at him. For the first time, the faintest hint of dejection spread across Lewis’s countenance.

“I and he—the man who wanted a star—were too different. And you and I are different as well. But even so, I have to ask. Can’t I persuade you to change your mind? To lend us your strength, mother the vessels of God and Diablo, and release Kaito Sena from his burden? Or if not that, would you at least join our side?”

“Enough of your blathering. Frankly, I’m surprised…you seem to be taking this all in stride. But that point passed us by *long ago*.”

Elisabeth’s reply came sharp.

The time had come.

The Three Kings’ unprecedented march had laid waste to all the mixed-race forces’ plans. At this point, not even swaying her mind would make a difference, not in the face of the all-consuming violence that was destroying everything in its wake. It was too late to wax poetic about ideals.

All that was left was to cut the two of them down, and—

But then, suddenly, out of the blue…

…Elisabeth realized it.

Something was off.

His reaction, Alice’s actions, everything.

What if… What if none of this came as a surprise?

There were countless tiny discrepancies she’d been filing away in her subconscious.

It was like looking at a giant painting filled with little moth-eaten holes, and now bits of information were snapping into place one after another over

the blank spaces. One by one, they twisted and turned and gradually came together.

After all, it was odd how Aguina's wife had been left behind.

And then there was the matter of Lewis's declaration of war. Even with a few of the demi-humans on his side, wiping out the three races was still a distant pipe dream. *But depending on the Fremd Torturchen's strength, it might well be possible to overturn the world's power structure.*

Their dream was the realization of a perfect, idealized utopia. And to achieve that, there were certain prerequisites they had to fulfill.

So what was it they needed?

Then a different scene flashed through Elisabeth's head. The raided villages filled with poison and burned to the ground. That wasn't the kind of thing you did if your aim was a long, peaceful rule. Next, she overlaid that horrible image with one much like it.

Jeanne's hometown.

Countless people had died agonizing deaths in sacrifice to the Torture Princess.

It was something that shouldn't have had anything to do with their current situation, but it filled a blank space all the same. However, it went without saying that pain was an indispensable component in dark magic, and that held just as true for the Fremd Torturchen. The completed painting melted, and something new rose up in its place. The mass of flesh born from its viscous sludge slowly but surely began assuming a human form.

Was that hell

truly of Satisbarina and Elisabeth's making?

Wasn't it possible that that place filled with agonized screams

was simply being used as a sacrifice?

"…No. You knew?! *You knew this would happen?!*" Elisabeth shouted, her voice a fevered bellow.

Behind her, the sound of flesh burning filled the air, punctuated by the snapping of bones.

Somewhere, someone was being burned. And off in the distance, dragon bones were being crushed underfoot. The earth was searing hot, and the sky was choked with the black of smoke and ash. Great roars rocked the air.

The Three Kings were laying out their decree.

Burn the earth. Burn the trees. Burn every blade of grass from the ground.

Many of our foes will perish. For that is the price their betrayal commands.

And amid all the death and slaughter, amid all the horrific tragedy…

…Lewis just gave

an ever-so-slight nod.

Have you ever seen someone who was murdered?

Someone who was sold off? Someone who was violated?

Someone who was robbed of all their dignity?

Someone who was cast into despair?

Someone who was dissected while they were still alive?

Have you ever seen someone get sacrificed and have it not weigh on their killers' consciences in the slightest?

Have you ever seen someone get victimized in the name of justice and faith?

I'll never forgive them. No matter who does. No matter if God himself does. No matter if even the dead do.

I'll never forgive them, even if I'm the only one.

I don't need a reason. After all, justice died long ago.

At this point, what use does anyone have for something so decent and proper?

Of course, I myself am anything but decent and proper now.

"Someone I wish was alive had been killed."

So, so, so many someones. As such, the lot falls on us to lop off your sinful heads.

It falls on us to spill rivers of your blood, stack mountains of your corpses, and reduce you all to ash.

For us, our victory lies in slaying as many of you as we can until the day of our ultimate defeat.

Just as you slew so many of us.

People will call this a farcical stage, no doubt. And that's fine.

I am, of course, nothing more than a jester. But to me, all this is very real.

Dashing through fields with deranged abandon and laughing my head off as the cruelty of it all sucks my sanity away is a luxury I am denied.

All I have is the crushing weight of reality.

They can all die. They can all be cursed. They can all be killed.

They—no, we—have to become proper shepherds.

We do, don't we? We do, right?

Please tell me I'm right.

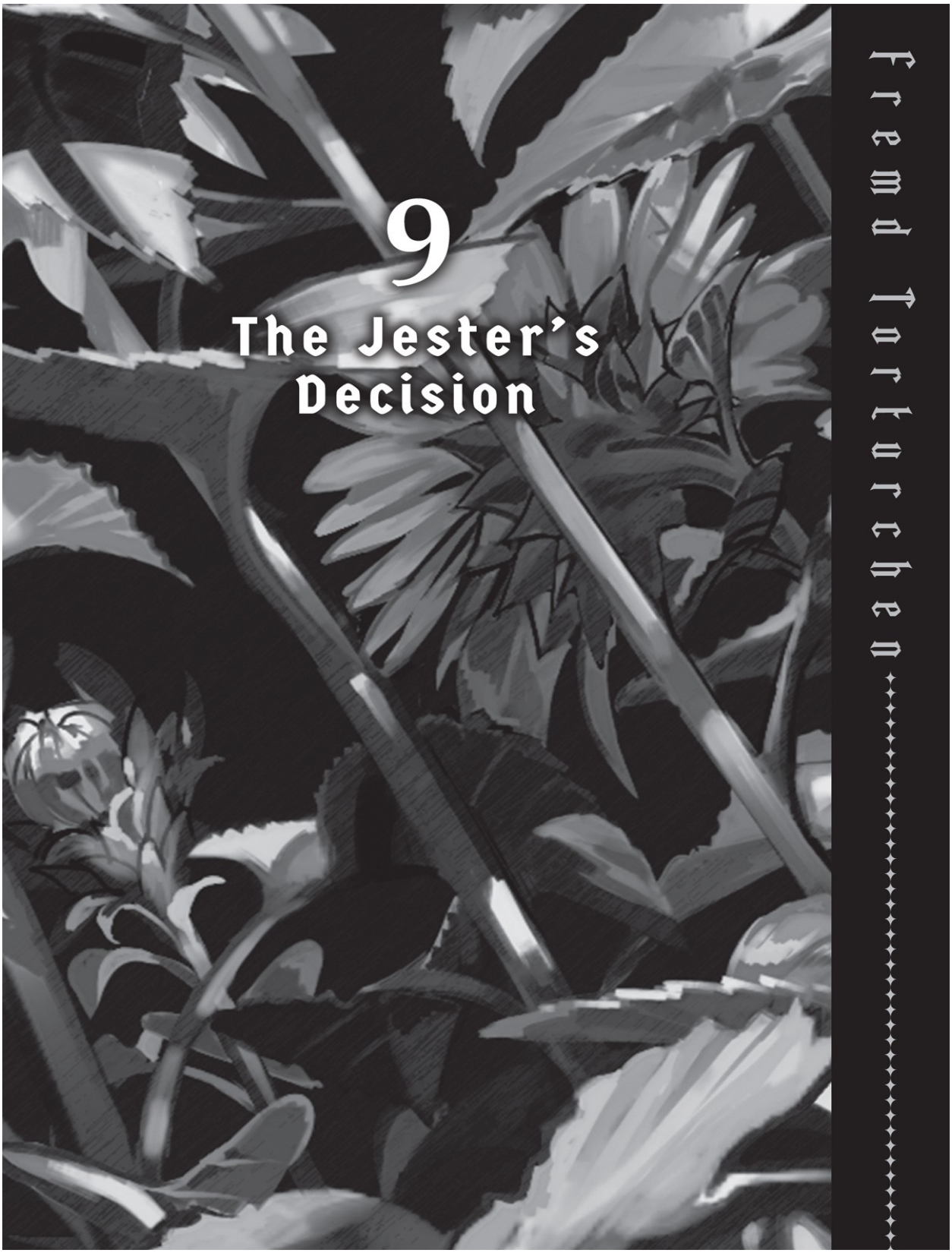
Please,

someone more righteous and pitiful than me, tell me I'm right.

I'm begging you.

I'm begging you...

Excerpt from a man's scribbles



9
The Jester's Decision

9
The Jester’s Decision

The room was red.

Its walls, floor, and ceiling were all dyed with the color of fresh blood.

It was the kind of room that burrowed its way into your eyeballs and chipped away at your mind. After all, staying calm and levelheaded when your entire field of view was filled with crimson was no easy task. But that was to be expected. The room was completely sequestered from the outside world. Nobody could leave it. And nobody could come in. It was almost like a graveyard. Or perhaps a prison.

It was a place where *nobody ought to be*.

That was why there was nobody there.

It just…was.

That was all.

*

“That should be self-evident. No matter how much our preparation exceeded the three races’, the gulf in resources and manpower was simply too vast. Wiping them out was a distant pipe dream. The only way for us to overturn the world’s power structure was with the Fremd Torturchen—so as such, it was imperative that we fostered her growth. Surely you knew all that, Elisabeth Le Fanu?”

Lewis began his speech in a calm voice, one almost reminiscent of a teacher’s.

It was dim in the temple courtyard, but the flames visible over its wall were as ferocious as ever.

A booming noise sounded out. The shelling must have started.

As Elisabeth recalled, metalworking and the weaponization thereof was a particular strength of the demi-humans. However, even their cannons would be powerless against the Three Kings. They probably wouldn’t so much as put a scratch in their sleek, hefty fur.

The best they could even hope for was to slow them down.

Despite that, the demi-humans continued their bombardment.

All of them were desperately fighting for their lives. Yet the temple and the temple alone remained quiet.

Lewis leisurely continued his dispassionate speech.

“We sought God and Diablo. But there were prerequisites we needed to meet before we could take the world, make it our own, and kill every last

fool who lived in it. And to meet them, there was something else we needed to prepare."

Pain and sacrifices were the water they needed to fill their limitless vessel.

Lifting the hem of her skirt once more, Alice beamed.

As she did, a trickle of crimson blood slid from the corner of her young lips.

Now Elisabeth realized in full just how closely the events unfolding around them resembled the manner of Jeanne's creation and the method Kaito had used to amass his power. There were two things Lewis had once told her.

"By summoning from another world a soul that's accustomed to pain, placing it in an immortal body, making it form a contract with a demon, and giving it the heart of an individual who's ingested demon flesh and accumulated a massive amount of pain, it's possible to artificially create an entity capable of revolutionizing the world.

"…I summoned a pair of weaker demons into a man and a woman, then destroyed both their egos. They had two children. Then I bred the children together. By repeating that process, it was possible to create a pure, powerful demon. Eventually, I created a demon powerful enough to meet my needs."

The ingested demon wasn't the only one; the demon for Alice's contract was likely produced in the same way.

In all likelihood, it was nothing more than a mass of flesh and power, a caterpillar-like being with no reason or intellect, capable only of writhing, cackling, and suffering. Its strength no doubt paled in comparison to the Kaiser's, but if all you needed was an apparatus for turning the pain of yourself and others into power, then it did the trick just fine. And because Alice was from another world, there was no limit to the amount of mana she could possess.

That method wouldn't be enough for her to surpass Kaito, but surpassing *Elisabeth* was another matter altogether.

Now, thanks to a ritual they'd prepared in advance, all the pain being generated in the settlement was being offered up to Alice.

"…So that was why you left Satisbarina behind."

If their location never got leaked, they could continue to demand God and Diablo while still going around and slaughtering villages to amass mana. And if the location did get leaked, they could sacrifice the settlement to collect all the pain they needed in one fell swoop.

No matter how things played out, they would reach their goal one way or the other. It was simply a matter of when.

"You never cared if your location got leaked or not, nor did you care what became of the settlement. So…what about your demi-human allies, the ones who were trying to protect their blood purity? You were just tricking them?"

“The demi-humans—well, it’s not really my place to say. We demanded God and Diablo. However, *we never held any great hopes for the world.* It’s true—we didn’t care if the beastfolk’s day of wrath came. The Three Kings’ brutal rampage would do well to fill our vessel, and if it served to advance the Fremd Torturchen’s growth, our comrades’ lives and riches were a small price to pay. Just more dead killers for the pile. After all, it seemed only reasonable that the design of our revenge engulf its creators as well.”

Once Lewis got started, his words flowed like water. Elisabeth thought back to his earlier proclamation.

“If the end of days truly had been upon us, maybe it would have all been fine. All your atrocities could be forgiven, written off as isolated incidents of fear-induced derangement. But God and Diablo failed to bring down the hammer—so I must do it in their stead. I’ll take this world, I’ll make it my own, and I’ll kill every last fool who walks upon it.

“I don’t need a reason. After all, justice died long ago. At this point, what use does anyone have for something so decent and proper?”

Lewis and his allies wanted to become “proper shepherds,” and their ultimate goal was the realization of a perfect, idealized utopia. But Lewis had never said a word about letting the world survive as is if it refused to accept his ideals.

What if stability on par with what the current world enjoyed

had never been part of his utopia’s design in the first place?

“God and Diablo are powerful deterrents, but even if you couldn’t get them, all you needed was strength enough to maintain your reign of terror anyhow. And as long as you could overturn the power structure, long-term stability was of secondary import… So what—you had no qualms about never allowing peace to exist again? Does your hatred truly run that deep?”

“It does. We are warped, Elisabeth Le Fanu—resigned, angry, and broken. This was why I called you weak, you know, why I said you had had everything taken from you. You see, you were changed so completely it took you this long to even realize that about us. And yet because the person who changed you wished it, you’ll never see him again. Poor Elisabeth.”

His tone was that of a teacher pitying their student.

Elisabeth bit down on her lip. His statement was an affront of the highest order, yet so too was it an undeniable truth.

Once, the Torture Princess had laughed as she basked in the anger and hatred of those around her. And not only that, she understood those emotions in their entirety. But a simple boy had irreparably changed her.

Then he left.

Smiling like a child.

And the day of their reunion would never come.

She was struck speechless. But only for a moment.

“They did it, Father! It’s him! They found out where Kaito Sena is!”

“…What?”

Alice shouted, her voice loud and clear.

As she puffed out her chest, her white ribbons stood straight up.

*

At that point, even Elisabeth couldn't help but let out a cry of disbelief.

Only a tiny handful of people knew where Kaito Sena was. How could she have found him? And yet, it didn't look like she was lying. Alice's innocent thrill seemed genuine.

Her glee made sense.

If they could get their hands on Kaito Sena, then they wouldn't need to make so many sacrifices to the Fremd Torturchen, and they would be able to realize their perfect utopia all the more quickly. That was just how powerful a deterrent God and Diablo were.

Alice leaped up with joy and continued on in a singsong voice.

"He's in the alchemists' hidden village, buried under the boulders! Rubens and Huey are on their way to secure him now! Hooray, they did it! They're the best! They're such good boys—why, I'll have to pat their heads and give them all sorts of praise!"

"You *wretch*…"

Elisabeth let out a hoarse epithet. And at the same time, she dashed forward.

Hesitation wasn't in the Torture Princess's nature.

All it took was a single second for her to decide that killing them now was her best course of action.

As she drew her long sword from a whirl of black and crimson, she elected to go for a thrust instead of a slash. Yet despite her sword's blistering speed, it was repelled by the curved back of a teaspoon. Sparks and azure petals went flying. However, having the sword land had never been Elisabeth's intent. At the same time she thrust it forward, she had also fired off a volley of stakes.

But Alice caught them all *in a cup*.

"What?"

"Dormouse's Tea Party."

The stakes slammed loudly into the cup one after another, launching it up into the air. A moment later, though, the cup sucked them all in like it was eating them whole, and a colony of twinkling, twinkling little bats appeared in their place.

Then the bats transformed into azure flower petals and faded away. But Elisabeth wasn't done yet.

"Gavel."

GOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOONG!

A solemn, bell-like noise rang out. A mass of crimson flower petals scattered magnificently through the air. An enormous iron hammer swung down from empty space, the very air trembling as it fell. The attack was powerful enough to crush someone flat, even if they were clad in full armor.

However, Alice didn’t so much as flinch. Her white hair bobbed as she did a little spin.

“Flamingo Croquet!”

Then a strange bird appeared in her arms. Its body was round and pink, and both its legs and neck were long and slender.

Then, of all things, she swung it by its supple neck and batted the hammer back, simultaneously using its belly to block the needles Elisabeth had stealthily launched at her. The bird let out a shrill, confounded cry when they hit.

Then it and the needles burst into azure and crimson flower petals respectively. The two hues exploded outward and scattered about the area.

Alice playfully closed one eye. Elisabeth clicked her tongue.

It was painfully clear how explosively the Fremd Torturchen’s powers were growing.

“Oh, Elisabeth, that just won’t do. And you know that, don’t you? See, I’m pretty strong. If you play with me like this, you’re not going to make it in time. But if you try leaving now, well…”

Alice chuckled. It was a mean little bait, but Elisabeth knew full well how accurate it was.

Alice and Lewis were no fools. Her explaining the situation to Elisabeth meant that even if she left now, she’d probably be too late. And even if she could make it in time, she would need to kill Alice and Lewis first. But doing so, especially quickly, was going to be far easier said than done.

Elisabeth was still shaken, and meanwhile, Alice was having a blast.

The Torture Princess and Fremd Torturchen stared daggers at each other.

Then, out of the blue

Elisabeth felt someone grab her by the belt around her throat—

“And *up* you go.”

“Hmm—hmm?”

Then, just like that, they hurled her with ease.

Right into a freshly drawn azure teleportation circle.

*

“Goodness me… You really are going soft, my dear. I told you once before, didn’t I?”

A carefree voice echoed through the courtyard.

Elisabeth blinked. More than once.

Vlad was standing on the other side of the azure, and by all accounts, it would seem that he was the one who’d said, “And *up* you go,” and tossed her into the circle. Elisabeth panicked. She didn’t understand what was going on.

First things first, she needed to collect herself. She shook her head back and forth.

Vlad shrugged and continued in an exasperated tone.

“Seeing someone beautiful succumb to sentimentality is like gazing at a work of art. And if they were a cruel woman, then all the more so. But as you are now, my precious, you’re hideous. Back when you were filled with grim resolve, you were far lovelier, far greater, far more radiant, and far more beautiful.”

Just like before, his voice was tinged with sadness.

Elisabeth stood, determined to find out what was going on. As she did, the teleportation circle started turning, and azure flower petals danced up into the air and began to block off her vision. Right when she was making to leave it, though, Elisabeth realized something.

The circle’s destination was Jeanne de Rais’s hidden village.

As the azure moved to obscure him, Vlad flipped something her way.

“But you know what? I’ll allow it. At this point, what choice do I have?”

Elisabeth caught it with one hand. She stared at him, trying to glean his intentions. However, Vlad just shrugged. And the expression on his face was different from his usual condescending smirk.

It felt almost forlorn, that smile of his.

Like the kind of face one would wear when watching their child.

Surrounded by azure, Elisabeth raised her voice.

“What are you playing at, Vlad?!”

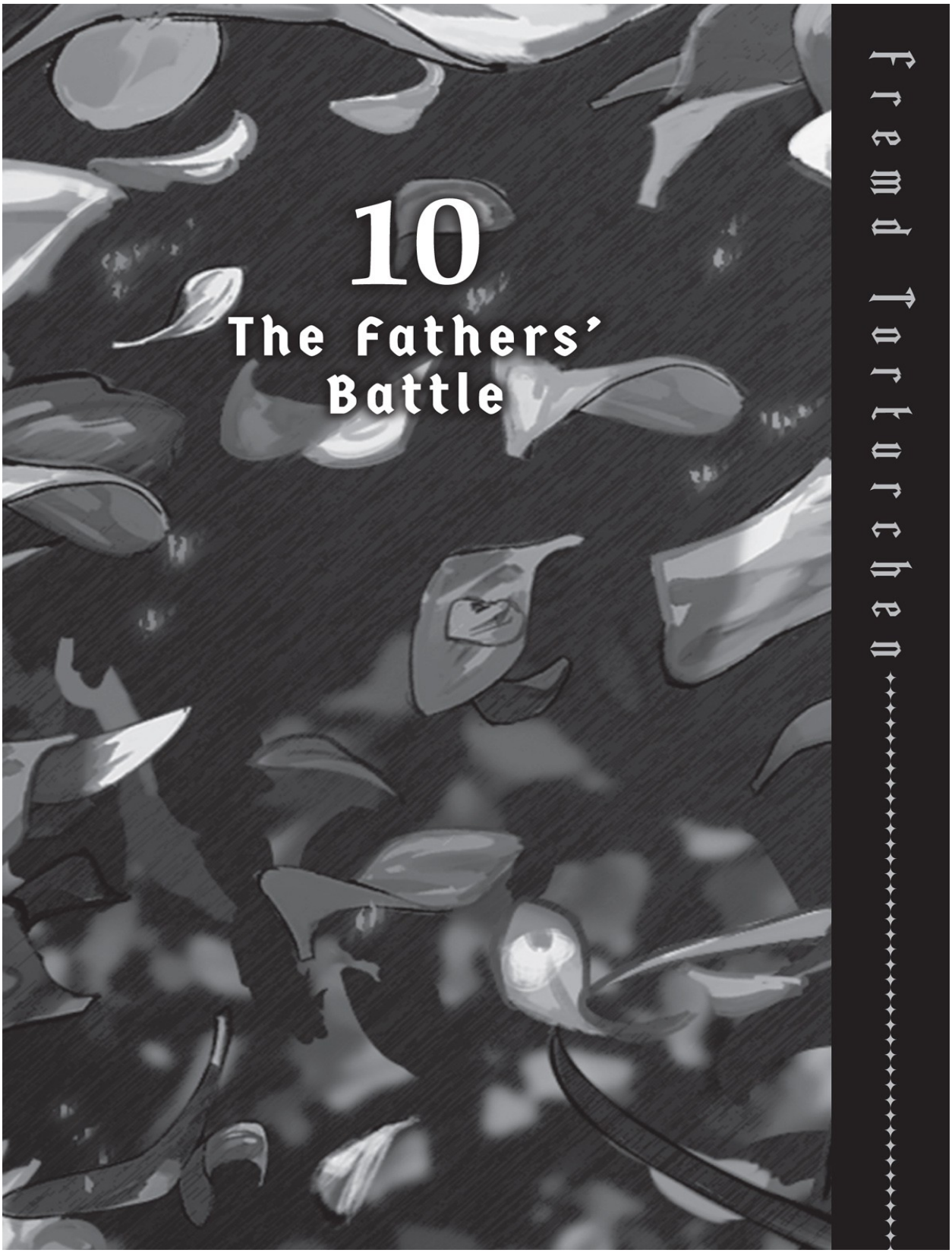
“Hmm… Answering in a way that would satisfy you would take more time than we have. So instead, I leave you with this—a quote that, as your favorite villainous ally, I’d always hoped to have a chance to say.”

His voice sounded detached, yet even so, he then began to brood. Through thick and thin, his love of theatrics never faltered. The azure’s dance then started to blot him out completely, rendering everything beyond it unseeable and inaudible.

But right before it could, he finally delivered his quote.

And oh, how grand his tone was.

“Go on ahead. I got this.”



10
The Fathers' Battle

10
The Fathers' Battle

Inside the red room, there was…

Well, that doesn't matter.

More importantly…

…let's take a look through the window.

*

"Vlad Le Fanu… You—"

"Be quiet. I'm taking a moment to bask in the afterglow."

Lewis's voice had a rare hint of loathing to it. However, Vlad cut him off.

Explosions echoed off in the distance. A hard hoof had come down, trampling the piled-up cannonballs before they could even be loaded. But Vlad paid that no heed. He stood amid the din and the clamor, closing his eyes in rapt ecstasy.

Lewis gave him a puzzled look.

"The…afterglow?"

"Of having parted with my dearest daughter and of having had my quote land rather well, yes. Surely you understand."

Actually, nobody ever understood what Vlad was on about.

Realizing how fruitless trying to converse would be, Lewis went silent.

Several nonsensical seconds passed them by.

Then, after supping his fill, Vlad opened his eyes, and in the same motion, spread his arms out wide and did a pointless little spin to milk the moment for all it was worth. When he spoke, his voice was full and resonant.

"All right, that's about enough of that! Sorry about the wait. Now then, let's talk about possibilities!"

"…Possibilities? Possibilities of what? As far as I can tell, you and I have nothing to talk about."

"Oh, but we do! So, so many things! And if you're dissatisfied, why, we can even talk about loathing. For no matter what we say, all this is but a tale played out atop a farcical stage. It's as the Kaiser said; eventually, everything will be lost. And that's a problem well worth worrying over…but right now, I actually have a different question I'd like to ask you."

All of a sudden, Vlad steered the conversation in a whole new direction. It was impossible to tell if he even wanted Lewis to follow along or not. He snapped his heels together with great irreverence, then abruptly thrust one finger straight forward.

And with the greatest of ease, he laid the man's secret bare.

"You don't have a heart, do you?"

Lewis went pale. For the first time, he seemed visibly shaken.

Vlad spun his finger as though gouging an open wound.

"That thing beating in your chest is no true organ. Am I wrong?"

"No true organ? …Father?"

Alice tilted her head and looked up at Lewis with concern. Vlad's malicious smile remained steadfast on his face. Lewis squeezed his chest as though trying to hide it from Vlad's eyes, and Vlad went on with great amusement.

"'Summoning from another world a soul that's accustomed to pain, placing it in an immortal body, making it form a contract with a demon, and giving it the heart of an individual who's ingested demon flesh and accumulated a massive amount of pain.' A wonderful idea and a perfect method to create someone capable of revolutionizing the world. But it does raise an interesting question, doesn't it—whose heart did you use?"

Vlad had a point. After all, you couldn't use just any old heart for something like that. Even just gathering the pain required a resolve of steel, and the whole process would be enough to kill most people.

And what's more, the person also needed to be an exceptionally skilled mage.

For example, one powerful enough to *summon someone from another world*.

"Of course, your otherworldly summons were anything but precise. No, you just gambled on the possibility of dredging up a soul that resembled yours, and this here is the fruit of your reliance on fortune! In any case, though, what you offered your new princess was your very own heart. All you have in that chest of yours now is a magically cultivated replacement, no? But it won't last long. And yet here you are, spinning tall tales about becoming a 'proper shepherd.'"

"…I was wondering what you were getting at, but that was no lie. Even after I'm gone, Alice and my comrades will still—"

"Oh please, it's a lie of the highest order! Come now, be honest. There's no need for you to try to keep up appearances with me."

Lewis was clearly flustered, and Vlad's malicious smile grew broader. It was an expression well worthy of the man who stood at the side of the fourteen demons' apex. He often came across as flippant, but he was still the man who had roused the fourteen demons and led them on their crusade. Exposing people's secret selves and hidden desires was his specialty.

Vlad went on in a lilting tone.

"…About this idealized utopia of yours. I see it a little differently than my dear daughter does. I mean, you talk a good game about proper shepherds, but is that really what you aim to become?"

"…Father, what is the man talking about?"

Alice was perplexed. However, Lewis offered her no answer. For once, he was the one whose composure was broken. Vlad's words were cutting him deeper than any knife could.

With each verbal stab, he gouged deeper into Lewis's wound.

"Once you sober up from your stupor of blood and pretext, all that awaits you are your own broken souls. Such is the nature of your act. But if you abandon even your lofty ideals, then…then it would reduce it to being nothing more than common slaughter. And if that happened, you wouldn't just be letting down your allies—no, you'd even be letting down your fallen brethren."

If Elisabeth had been there, she would have no doubt agreed with him.

Lewis's actions were all far too wasteful.

Even when his goal was just to make a friend, his process had still involved leaving a trail of corpses in his wake.

It was true: When an avenger played the role of judge, their verdict would always be the same.

Yet not even that was enough to account for the callous way Lewis racked up his body count.

It was almost like he was seeking revenge for revenge's sake.

"That was why you needed a friend, wasn't it? You know, I had my eye on him, too. But for all his power and fortitude and tenacity, he was simply too righteous. It's rare, finding a person who believes in God so completely and yet doesn't blame him for a thing. He's different from you, that's for sure. Too different. Honestly, what did you even think you had in common? Did you seriously delude yourself into thinking that you and he were the same? That you and that saint were—"

"Shut up, Vlad Le Fanu!"

"You wanted someone righteous by your side, didn't you? Someone to make sure you didn't stray too far down an errant path. A linchpin, as it were. But then he ended up dying. Ha-ha."

Vlad shrugged as he tossed in a quick laugh at the saint's death. Lewis offered him no reply.

As Vlad faced him, his smile grew broader still, and he whispered in the most enticing of tones.

"Admit it. All you want is a weapon capable of killing as many as possible."

"Would you mind not saying any more? I have no interest in listening to any more of your drivel."

Lewis tried to be evasive, knowing full well how dangerous it was to give even a scrap of information to that man. However, the look in Alice's innocent eyes was the only answer Vlad needed. He let out a chuckle.

"Ah, forgive me. I suppose I was being a *bad influence*. Goodness, how fraught fatherhood is. You always have to be thinking about the future, always have to be feigning concern. I can sympathize, you know, being a father myself and all."

Vlad’s expression of sympathy was utterly shameless, but surprisingly, he held true to his word and went silent.

Then, after falling back a few steps, he laid out his terms.

“If you don’t want to hear any more of what I have to say, then tell the girl to stand down. In turn, I won’t use the Kaiser.”

Lewis raised an eyebrow, not sure what Vlad was getting at.

Vlad shrugged, disappointed at how slow Lewis was on the uptake. Then he extended his right arm as though inviting him to dance.

“You can fight, too, can’t you?”

And with that, Vlad’s proposal was made. He turned around once more and took one step, then another. After the second, he whirled back around and spread his arms wide. Then, with the red glow at the wall’s top to his back, he spoke with brazen dignity.

“Come now—let’s see whose paternal love is stronger!”

*

No words of consent rose up to meet him.

Instead, their battle began in silence.

First off, Lewis gave Alice’s shoulder a soft, wordless push to gently signal her to fall back. Vlad nodded in satisfaction. *Splendid.* Then, the next moment, Lewis vanished.

With his arms still spread wide, Vlad cocked his head in confusion.

An ax came barreling straight down at his cervical vertebrae.

Without turning around, Vlad reached out and blocked the massive blade with his palm. It cleaved through his flesh, but halfway in, the ax came to an abrupt stop, as though it had been caught between someone’s teeth.

Lewis spoke, his voice far deeper than it had been up until then.

“What trickery is this?”

“Hmm? I just reinforced my bones with magic, that’s all. The flesh I left as is, though. I wanted to see how your attack would feel. And power aside, that was quite interesting! I never would have expected it to come in such a form!”

Lewis went silent again and forcibly wrenched his ax free. It left a deep horizontal wound on Vlad’s hand.

Blood violently gushed forth, staining the courtyard flowers a grisly red. A single pinkie toppled comically to the ground.

Vlad took a lick of his own blood. His lips curled into a beguiling grin.

“You carry yourself like a scholar, but I can see you’re not afraid to get rough when it’s your turn to fight! Of course, it’s not so easy labeling one or the other as your ‘true nature.’ Dark magic can easily be influenced by how aggressive its wielder is, after all. A side effect, perhaps, of how instinctively it’s learned.”

“When I joined the rebel organization, the first things I picked up were assassination techniques. Fitting work for a petty grunt, no?”

“Ah, I see. Given how unhesitatingly you aimed for my vitals, I should have guessed you— Whoa there!”

This time, Vlad fell back a step.

At some point, Lewis had closed in on him. Three crescent-shaped knives peeked out from within Lewis’s black outfit, each one a different length. Lewis threw them in circles one after another.

Vlad dodged two of them, then shattered the third with his finger. Darkness and azure petals scattered through the air.

Left empty-handed, Lewis let out a displeased murmur.

“So what, you took the first blow on purpose?”

“I said as much, didn’t I? Still, what a letdown. I mean, I never thought you’d be on the level I was in my prime, but I also didn’t think you’d be *this* bor—”

“Your head.”

A low murmur slipped from Lewis’s lips.

For a second, Vlad looked confused. Soon, though, a look of pure joy spread across his entire face.

The one eye Lewis had visible beneath his mask practically dripped with loathing. Still as impassive as ever, he slowly raised a hand to point at Vlad’s head. His voice was dry and hoarse.

“You probably don’t even realize it, but you’re protecting your head. And the rate at which mana flows through you is unusual, too. That body of yours isn’t human—so I take it that whatever houses your soul is stored in your head?”

“Bravo! *Bravissimo*, using that keen eye of yours to make up for your lack of strength. How right you are! …Wait, I probably shouldn’t have told you that, hmm. Bad habit of mine.”

“Ah, I see now. You’re an idiot.”

Vlad gave Lewis’s biting remark a nonchalant shrug.

As he did, a massive pair of blades made for the nape of his neck.

The strange weapon had extended from Lewis’s long sleeve as though in place of his arm. It was like a pair of garden shears, and Vlad’s head was the unwanted plant they were trying to prune. However, Vlad dropped his torso forward as spontaneously as if he’d tripped. The two blades snapped together, just barely missing the top of his head.

Vlad then swung his long leg up and leveled a kick at Lewis’s jaw. Lewis tilted his body to avoid the blow, then suddenly twisted to the side and hurled his shears at seemingly nothing. Sure enough, though, Vlad appeared at their destination not a moment after they left Lewis’s hand.

The shears pierced Vlad clean through. However, his figure merely crumbled away.

A torrent of azure petals and black darkness luxuriously exploded in all directions. When the air cleared, Vlad was standing there as though nothing had happened. And almost as an afterthought, his severed pinkie was back in its original spot as well.

It had been like watching a magic trick.

Lewis clicked his tongue in unreserved annoyance.

"…Well, that's irritating. It's like your very existence is all one big joke."

"You know, my dear daughter tells me the same thing all the time! For how long her rebellious phase has lasted, you'd think she'd at least have mellowed out a bit by now, no?"

"My Alice would never say something like that. Have you considered that she might just not like you?"

A cheer of encouragement rose up from behind Lewis. "That's right—I'm Father's good little girl! Go, Father! You can do it!"

The mood about them was disconcertingly relaxed. However, Vlad didn't seem to mind. "Well *that* can't be it," he muttered in genuine displeasure. Meanwhile, Lewis slid a new blade out of his sleeve.

This time, it was his turn to mutter.

"I know why you picked this fight with me."

"Oh-ho, what's this? Not to steal your thunder or anything, but I was just hoping to amuse myself."

"…I can tell that's no lie. But it isn't the whole truth, is it? Holding Alice in check and going up against me alone allowed Elisabeth to escape…but I don't understand why. Why would you go to such lengths?"

As he posed the question, Lewis leveled a series of rapid thrusts at Vlad. Dodging them all would have been nigh impossible.

However, the majority of the blows were mere feints.

Vlad could see that plain as day, so he snapped his fingers as he danced his way around the important ones.

One blow came at a sharp diagonal straight for his head, and that was the sole strike Vlad took the effort to actively repel. When he did, though, other blades found their marks and ran his arm and shoulder through. Despite all the blood gushing forth, though, Vlad was still able to put some distance between himself and Lewis.

His body was in a grim state, but he let out a composed laugh all the same.

Lewis continued his line of questioning, as though the previous exchange of blows hadn't even happened.

"You're the Kaiser's old contractor, so the Torture Princess had every reason to hate you. She probably holds you in great contempt. So then, why? Do you even know? My wanting a friend was one thing, but this makes even less sense. *What exactly is Elisabeth Le Fanu to you?*"

Lewis was clearly puzzled. Vlad stopped moving, and his glib expression vanished.

Then, serious as could be, he gave his answer as though it were the most obvious thing in the world.

He was like a man boasting of his greatest treasure.

"My dear daughter is simply that. She's my daughter, and she's dear to me."

*

For a few seconds, Lewis stood motionless. It was unusual, seeing him so utterly at a loss for words.

He shook his head in exasperation and disbelief. At that point, he was forgetting to even attack.

"That can't be… You seriously only think of her as a beloved child?"

"Of…course? If not for that, I don't know how you think I could forgive being *burned alive*."

Vlad placed his hand atop his chest and spoke with great aplomb.

Lewis found himself struck speechless for the third time. However, the claim had a certain logic to it.

Based on what had been listed in the records, Elisabeth had been the one to sentence Vlad Le Fanu to death by burning. Not even a crumb of ash had remained of him. Yet Vlad's replica didn't seem to resent her for that.

In fact, he was even working alongside her.

Nobody who thought like a normal person would ever be able to do that.

"Now then, while you're reeling in shock, I hope you don't mind if I wax eloquent for a moment. You see, I thought of Kaito Sena as an outstanding son as well. He was also my lord, but even so— At first, I was just amusing myself by seeing how far I could make him sink, but not even I could have imagined how clear his twisted mind would remain, right till the bitter end! Thanks to him, I enjoyed every one of my days."

Suddenly, Vlad's voice became rich with emotion, catching Lewis completely off guard. Vlad's expression was that of a man reminiscing on events that had taken place a century—perhaps even a millennium—prior, and he continued in a forlorn tone.

"But then he went and sealed himself in that crystal. It was sad, of course, but still it was a decision my dear son made of his own volition. A symbol of his growth from an unfledged vessel to a full, twisted man. And I have every intention of respecting his choice. But even so, *what kind of a parent wouldn't grieve over something like that?*"

Vlad shook his head as the emotions ran through him all over again.

Lewis went pale. For Vlad Le Fanu of all people to say something like that was shameless beyond belief. Given all the lives he'd personally extinguished, it was an act that almost bordered on blasphemy.

And yet Vlad went on, utterly carefree.

"But ever since this whole mess began, a whole new worry began plaguing me. And the bad feeling in my gut only grew stronger when your rebel army started butchering those villages. At that rate, I feared, I was going to lose my precious daughter as well. Such was the gravity of the dangerous change Kaito Sena's death sparked in her. I lamented that change at first, but now I forgive her. For everything. There was a time

when I would have welcomed her death, but that changed when I lost my son. Now, I just don't want her to die."

"…What."

"I said, I don't want her to die."

It took Lewis a moment to parse what he'd just heard. Once he did, though, it wasn't shock that crossed his face. It was rage.

He drew yet another blade, a shark-toothed sword designed to cause massive blood loss, and swung it with feral speed. Vlad dodged it several times, occasionally parrying it as it spun.

As their duel to the death grew ever fiercer, Lewis shouted.

"Enough of your bullshit, Vlad Le Fanu! You've killed thousands—tens of thousands! And plenty of my people number among your victims' ranks! You slaughter people randomly and impartially, and you take joy in the act! And yet you, *you* say that you don't want someone to die?! I might not be in any position to talk, but you have to be kidding me!"

"Oh, I assure you I'm not, but you're right on all the other fronts! Sure, I killed tens of thousands! But what's wrong with that? The vast majority of people, be they humans or beastfolk or demi-humans or mixed race, *aren't worth the air they breathe*! They're garbage, one and all! And that's precisely why I hold such affection for my children and none others. What is it you find so contradictory about that?"

Vlad finished on a proud, brazen note. Lewis could tell that there was nothing to be gained from talking to him. Vlad lived by a value system that was his and his alone. The scales he measured the world by were simply calibrated differently from all the others.

In all likelihood, nobody would ever truly understand him.

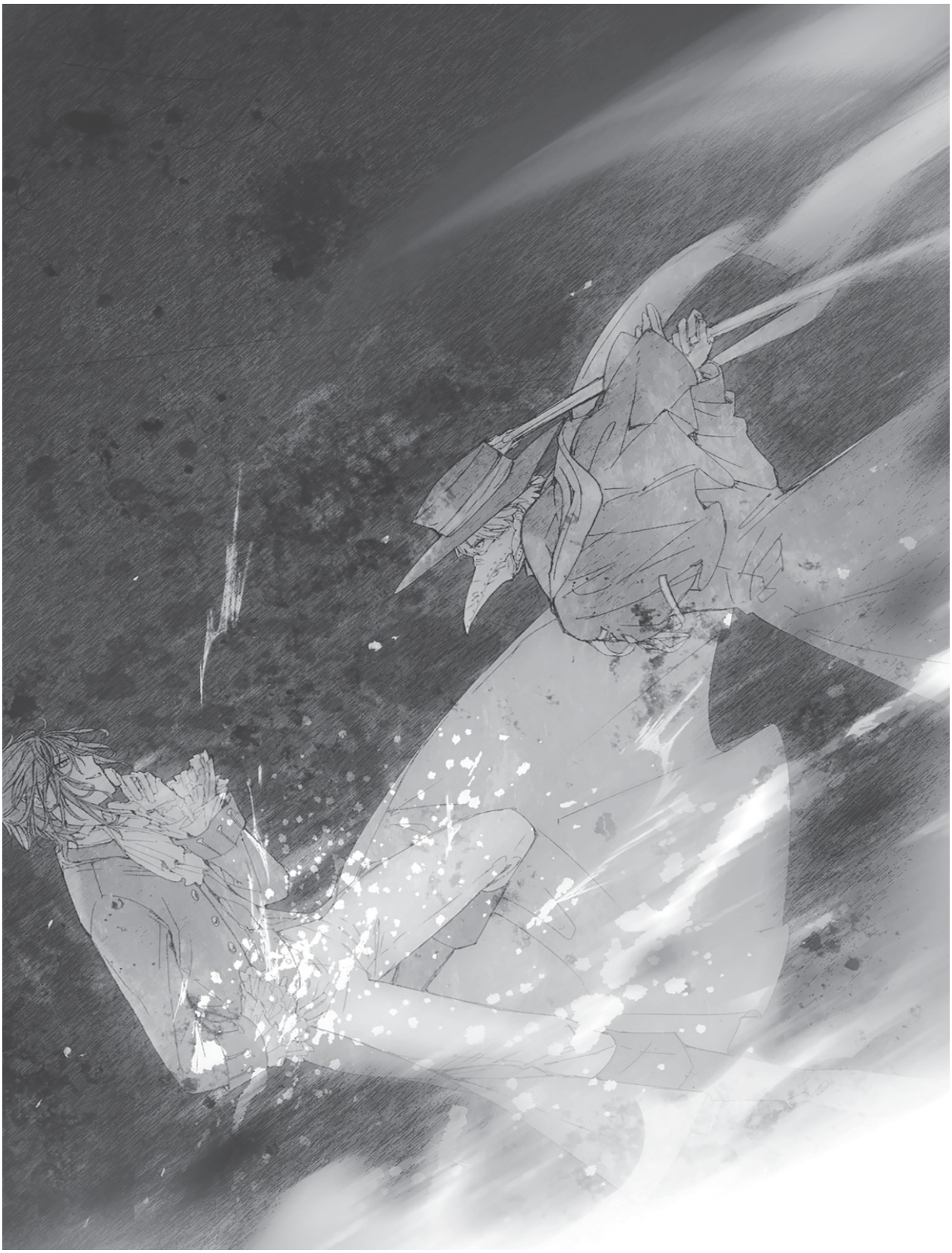
Not even his beloved son and daughter.

However, Vlad himself didn't mind that fact in the least. And that was all there was to it.

"Love is nothing more than an illusion, and it certainly isn't something worth risking your life for. Or at least, that's what I thought. But as it turns out, making the ultimate sacrifice for paternal love's sake isn't half-bad! I guess you learn something new every day!"

Vlad enjoyed a moment of personal delight. In fact, he got so immersed in his own monologue that Lewis's sword strikes began landing true and gouging deep cuts in his body. But even with his skin and flesh shorn away and his blood pouring out from all over, Vlad's smile remained unbroken, and his stance remained the same as before.

Lewis wasn't about to let that opening slip him by. He snapped his fingers, and a hefty handle plopped down into his pale palms.



It belonged to a massive executioner’s ax.

Lewis then struck with it so quickly and brutally it would have been challenging even to block. And that was when it happened.

Lewis’s neck split open.

“Ah… Gack…”

Unable to even scream, Lewis let out an agonized gasp. It took everything he had just to stay upright.

Vlad looked down at him with an icy glare. He dismissed the steel wire he was holding and shook his head.

“You talked a good game about being a practiced assassin, but at the end of the day, you’re nothing but a rank amateur. All it takes to down a man is a tiny cut to a single artery, so what do you need a weapon that large for? Come now, don’t get caught dancing to my tune over some dramatic flair and a little monologue or two.”

“Father!”

“Stay back, Alice!”

Alice cried out and made to rush over, but Lewis quickly stopped her. He staggered back a bit and summoned a swarm of azure petals and black miasma to converge on his wound. Realizing how difficult it would be to efficiently heal it, he elected instead just to cauterize it. After forcibly stopping the bleeding, he spoke.

“I’m…fine. There’s no need for you…to be concerned. The blow was…a far cry…from fatal.”

“Well, that’s certainly true enough. It was never meant to kill you, after all. My son and my daughter both had rebellious streaks, and they never listened to what I had to say. *Why deprive myself of the perfect audience?*”

“And one…other thing…”

“Oh?”

Vlad obediently cupped his ear, and Lewis raised his head.

His mask and skin were both stained with his blood, and the visible half of his face was violently grimacing. Now his eye burned with clear, unbridled malice.

Vlad observed the change with great pleasure.

Lewis let out a triumphant laugh in reply.

“It’s over.”

“What is?”

And with that, the right half of Vlad’s grinning face

vanished into nothing.

*

What had just happened?

Vlad blinked his one remaining eye in puzzlement. The next moment, though, his body crumpled to the ground, toppling unceremoniously forward like a marionette with its strings cut.

Alice looked down at his unseemly state. When she spoke, her voice was cold.

“I didn’t move, you know. Just like Father told me.”

Sure enough, she was telling the truth. She had her hands clasped behind her back like a good little girl.

No, the change had taken place in the courtyard itself.

An attack whose pitch lay beyond audible perception had burned the temple half to the ground. Its courtyard, a precious patch of green amid the vast arid desert, was gone. Searing temperatures had burned away the ground and transfigured it into some sort of smooth material.

Vlad scrunched his face up a little. Not even he grasped the reason behind the change.

Seriously, what had just happened?

Alice, who had seen the whole thing, glared at him. Her white rabbit ribbons bobbed from side to side, yet it was the Red Queen she resembled most as she gazed down at the broken man. Taking mercy on him, she deigned to answer his unspoken question.

“But despair did.”

Her voice rang with ridicule

as though mocking him for expecting anything more of the world.

*

Off in the distance, a new roar rose up.

Countless voices screamed, yet they were all one and the same.

Die. Die. Die. The time has come. I have found you with my eyes.

The heavens and earth shall be moved, and thou shalt come to judge the world by fire.

This day, day of wrath

calamity and misery

day of great and exceeding bitterness.

This day our master is resurrected.

“…The Sand Queen.”

Vlad didn’t look at the figure shifting in the flames, but he reached his conclusion all the same.

The one being who could stand on equal footing with the Three Kings was on the move.

To be more precise, she hadn’t actually been resurrected. *Her corpse was simply moving.* However, there was no shortage of legends about the Sand Queen going to battle, and now even her skin had become crystallized. No blade or magic could pierce it.

Lifeless as she was, she posed just as much of a threat as she had when she was alive.

As he listened to the excited hubbub coming from outside, Vlad let out a low laugh.

“Heh… I see… So you weren’t tricking the demi-humans after all.”

“That’s right. They, too, had a victory they sought. With the help of our magical resources and expertise, the demi-humans came to a realization—that there was a massive store of mana preserved within the Sand Queen’s body. From there, all they had to do was apply the same method to it one did when animating a stone golem. They awakened the reactor and turned her perfectly preserved corpse into a weapon.”

Lewis gave his answer matter-of-factly. To the demi-humans, the Sand Queen was no doubt their final trump card, one they had wanted to avoid playing unless absolutely necessary. In all likelihood, having the teleportation circle on her tongue analyzed was probably the trigger that activated her.

Then, once the demi-humans learned of the Three Kings’ march, they must have sent her to the settlement in much the same way the beastfolk sent the Three Kings.

From the sound of it, her appearance had caught the Three Kings off guard, and they had suffered injuries.

That fact was evidenced by the sounds of beastfolk shrieking and screaming. However, before their wails had a chance to turn to angry shouts, the grief-stricken voices went silent one after another. They must have been burned away or perhaps simply crushed.

Vlad glanced around, his eyeball practically hanging out of its socket.

The world was burning red and crimson and scarlet.

Everything was dying.

It was ironic really. Out of rage, the beastfolk had spurred the Three Kings of the Forest into action, and to oppose them, the demi-humans had summoned the Sand Queen. One act of revenge was being piled atop another.

Everyone was screaming that their enemies were the sinful ones.

Vlad let out a small chuckle. All anyone wanted was a reason to seek revenge.

They needed to scream from the rooftops that justice was on their side. Because if they didn’t, all that would await them would be their own broken souls.

All this, everything that was happening, was simply a means to that end.

“See, this is why I can’t stand ordinary people. They’re such headaches.”

As the words dribbled from Vlad’s mouth, he shut his one remaining eyelid, as though unable to bear the weight of his exhaustion.

An executioner’s sword fell out of the air into Lewis’s hand. Much like Elisabeth’s, it was a weapon designed for beheadings. One final act of

compassion. With the merciful blade in hand, Lewis approached his fool of an opponent.

“It’s over, Vlad Le Fanu. You were a wicked man, vulgar through and through. But I do respect that love of yours, egotistical as it was… You were right—it’s a father’s duty to protect his children.”

“So…it is… But, you know…you’re the last…person…I want telling…me that…”

Vlad curled his nearly shredded lips into a smile. He opened his eye once more, casting a gaze Lewis’s way that seemed to be laying some secret of his bare. Lewis offered him silence in return. He raised the executioner’s sword aloft.

This would mark the farce’s end.

Vlad vomited an ugly mess of blood, flesh, and teeth. As an organ-laden mass fell out the side of his throat, he let out a faint murmur.

“Ah…it’s over… It’s over…isn’t it?”

“It is. It’s over. Now, go to your rest.”

“It is, O He Who Rears Hell Within His Mind. And be thankful for that. I was just getting bored of watching the performance.

“Geh-heh-heh-heh-heh-heh, fu-heh-heh-heh-heh-heh, geh-heh-heh-heh-heh-heh.”

The laugh that boomed out sounded almost human.

Lewis, caught off guard, stared in blank shock.

For there was something he had never realized.

There wasn’t a person alive who truly understood Vlad Le Fanu. Few and far between were the people who would even think of sympathizing with a villain such as he. *And there was no way that a man like that would ever see his promise through to the end.*

Then, with an absurd spurting noise
a certain chest clad in a black, doctorly outfit
got torn apart like tissue paper.

*

“See, this is why I called you an amateur. What possessed you to think I would keep my word?”

It defied explanation, but Vlad’s voice rang with a brazen pride. As the words left his mouth, Alice let out a stupefied cry.

“…Huh? Hmm? What?! …F-Father? Father… Father, Father!”

She screamed and ran over to Lewis. Utterly indifferent to the state her foe was in, she reached out her young arms as far as they would go. Thanks to her efforts, she was able to catch Lewis’s body right before it toppled over.

She propped him up, trying desperately to keep his guts from spilling out.

“Oh, thank goodness—I made it in time. Please, Father, you have to pull yourself…together…”

Suddenly, something toppled to the ground between them. It was small. Something she’d never seen before.

It was a small lump of flesh that resembled a small ashen sack—

—and it was in the exact same shape as a heart.

“…F-Father? No… No, no, this can’t be happening. This isn’t happening, is it?”

The words spilled from Alice’s mouth as a shocked whisper. Lewis tried to answer her, but all he got for his trouble was a mouthful of blood. He was still alive, but his wounds were far too serious to be healed. He didn’t have much time.

Vlad gazed over at them and let out a cruel laugh. Beside him, the supreme hound slapped the ground with his tail.

“Now then, O contractor of mine, what to do? I could seize the opportunity to flee with you in my mouth, but not only would your brains fall out, your self-destruct device is going to go off. I feel we’re out of options. I imagine you’d taste vile, but nonetheless, how would you feel about me eating you?”

“No, better not. Didn’t you get tired of eating human flesh? And besides, I have a favor to ask of you.”

Vlad’s voice rang with an unusual degree of sincerity. The Kaiser turned his snout up with unconcealed disgust.

Hellfire burned in the black dog’s eyes as he let out a low groan.

“Your tone sickens me, O He Who Rears Hell Within His Mind. Yet at the same time, I’m curious as to what sort of legacy you aim to leave. Speak your piece.”

“I need you to give my dear daughter a message—‘I really did love you from the bottom of my heart.’”

“Is that truly the sort of thing a villain ought to be saying?”

The Kaiser sounded utterly exasperated. Meanwhile, Alice sat as motionless as if her soul had left her body.

The man and the dog, on the other hand, were sharing a conversation like they didn’t have a care in the world. Vlad spat out a chunk of his tongue, then explained himself with great amusement.

“Oh, but that’th prethithely why… Hmm, my words aren’t coming out quite right. I said, that’s precisely why! This way, I can leave her with a wound that’ll never heal. And the best part is it’s completely true! Because at the end of the day, isn’t wanting to be remembered the most human desire there is?”

“Oh, please. Don’t go talking yourself up now. Besides, I’m sure she is already well aware.”

The Kaiser snorted. Vlad gave his one remaining hand a little wave to no one in particular, and the blue ring on his middle finger gleamed. The black

dog shook his tail from side to side as though to mock Vlad's foolishness. However, he then cocked his head.

"Wait a minute. You're my contractor. If you die, won't I vanish with you?"

"Ha-ha… I guess that is a problem… Hey now, don't go biting me!"

"How dare you. HOW DARE YOUUUUUUUUUUUUU!"

Suddenly, a scream split the air.

Still holding Lewis, Alice was looking Vlad's way. The rage and bloodlust burning in her eyes were so intense they seemed liable to spill out from within. They almost resembled the supreme hound's hellfire.

Vlad replied by flashing a smile. Alice raised her arm aloft.

This time, the farce was truly, truly over.

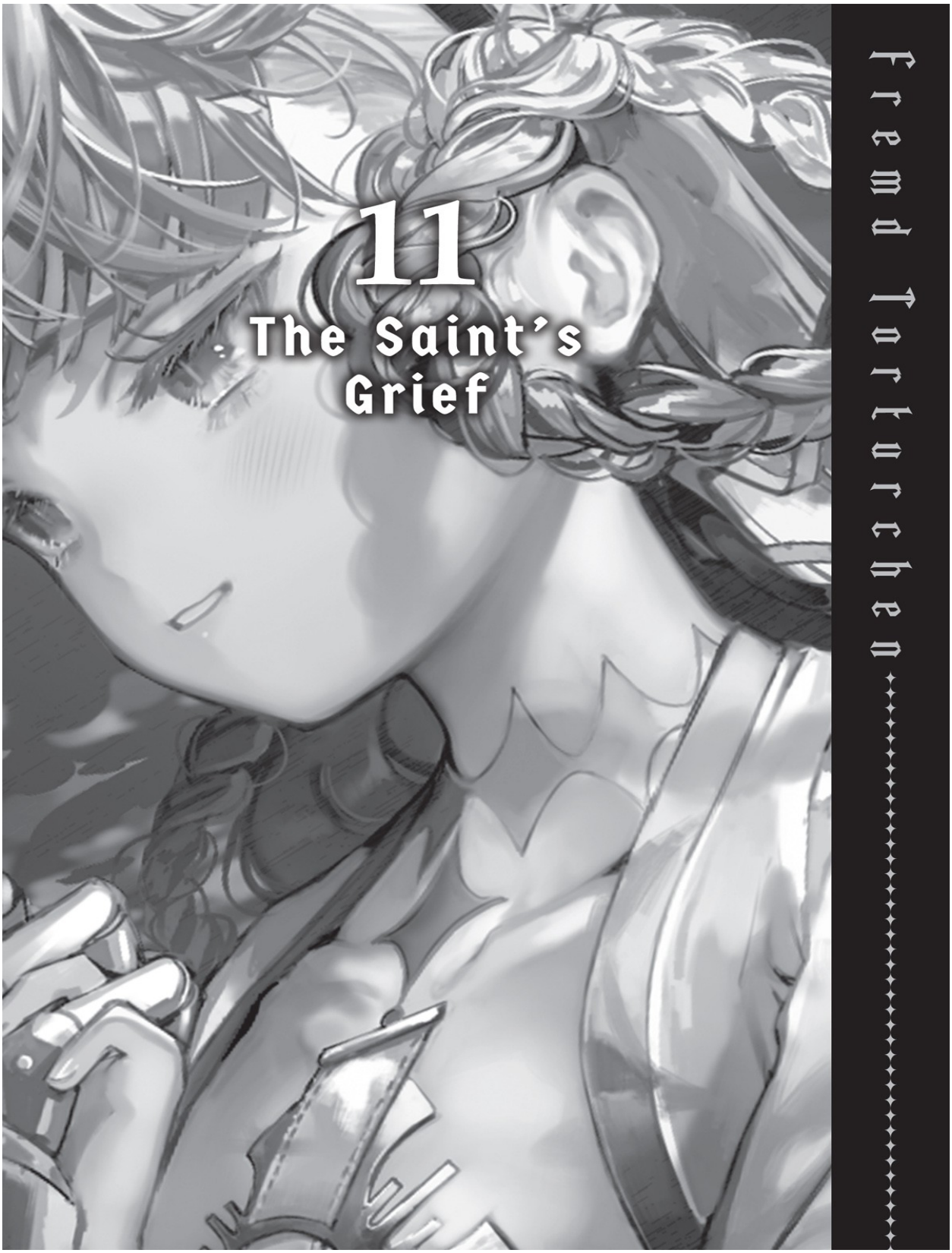
And oh, what a long, flippant, cruel, delightfully bothersome performance it had been.

Then Vlad's eye shifted…and he let out a peaceful murmur.

"Oh… It's you."

A single, incomprehensible tear fell.

Then a cloud of azure petals and black darkness swallowed even that up as Vlad Le Fanu made his final exit from the world.



11
The Saint's Grief

11
The Saint’s Grief

The room was red.

Now the people were back at its plain, well-built desk. The man and the woman gazed down at the chessboard. What had once been a battlefield could no longer reasonably be described by that term. Now it was just chaos. Countless pieces lay broken, and even the board itself had been shattered.

Kaito Sena picked up one of the pieces.

It was shaped like a king, yet strangely, it had no crown.

For a moment, Kaito Sena just gazed at the piece with its cruelly broken face. He started to say something. In the end, though, he elected just to shake his head without saying a word. Still silent, he snapped his fingers.

The piece dissolved into azure flower petals.

Nothing of it remained.

The two of them had had their parting long ago.

In fact, it had taken place on the day Kaito Sena himself “died.”

Then Kaito Sena slumped back in his chair. He closed his eyes and sank into a deep silence. He seemed to be mourning someone’s death. Or perhaps he was lamenting the madness taking place atop the board.

It was unclear which.

Either would have sufficed.

*

“Who are you trying to wound exactly? Fool. I’ll have you forgotten on the morrow.”

For a moment, Elisabeth lapsed into thought. However, she soon shook her head and gave her fingers a snap. A blue ring floated up and shattered. Its jagged fragments hung motionlessly in the air.

Then those fragments dissolved into azure flower petals.

The ring was what Vlad had tossed her right before he teleported her away.

When it shattered, so too did the window she’d been looking through. Even before that, though, its image had gone completely dark.

Elisabeth dispelled it, closing the window as one would a coffin.

Nothing of it remained.

Considering how devious he had been, it was almost hard to believe he was actually gone.

Elisabeth closed her eyes and thought of nothing.

Suddenly, a clear, dignified voice sounded out.

"…So Vlad Le Fanu is dead?"

"Aye, so he is. He was as good as dead already, but Alice dealt the coup de grâce. And I don't imagine he had any spare replicas lying around… Anyhow, the Sand Queen is in play too now. We need to make haste."

Elisabeth spoke as though intent on moving past the man's death as quickly as possible.

She intentionally redirected her attention to the passages she'd once read.

"A body unheld by death's fell claim." "A radiant form." "A glittering frame."

"Adorned with reddened scales." "Like beautiful stones." "Our eternal protector."

There were countless legends of the Sand Queen's glorious battles, and even in death, she was still a formidable weapon. Nobody could have imagined that the demi-humans would have a counterstrategy ready for the Three Kings of the Forest. Now things were going to get really ugly.

Elisabeth cast her fatigued gaze forward.

A gleaming crystal sat before her.

And in it, Kaito Sena and Hina were sleeping peacefully amid the boulders.

By all rights, Alice's statement should have come true. Elisabeth shouldn't have been able to make it in time. However, the crystal was still there, safe and sound. Elisabeth turned her focus to the duo responsible.

The two stood as a pair, gold on the left and silver on the right.

Jeanne and Izabella.

By the time Elisabeth got there, the mixed-race people had already been trounced. Two of them—likely Rubens and Huey—were lying unconscious on the ground, and Jeanne stood astride them with one foot planted on each.

According to Jeanne and Izabella, those two had fought tooth and nail to let the rest of their allies escape. The fact of the matter was, though, that it didn't much matter what exactly had happened there. The bigger problem was why Jeanne and Izabella were there at all.

How had they gotten there on such an impossible notice? And what's more, why weren't they at the demi-human settlement to take part in the crucial battle happening there? However, Jeanne and Izabella had answered those questions in full earlier.

"Oh my, Fool, you didn't know? Damn, you really did go soft! C'mon, how fuckin' obvious was it that the best way for those jackasses to turn the tables on us would be snatchin' up God and Diablo?"

"We knew that you two were handling Alice and Lewis, so we got permission to stand guard here. Jeanne was the one who figured out where to go. She reasoned that if you wanted to hide something, this would be the best place to do it. When we split up, I assumed she would be back

immediately, but it turned out that she got it right on the first try. That intuition of hers is really quite something. I must admit I'm proud of her."

After hearing that, Elisabeth was satisfied.

Now that she thought about it, that did make sense. She hadn't considered it at the time, but Jeanne knew how well hidden this place was better than anyone. Once she realized that was what happened, a flood of relief washed over her.

If those two had actually switched sides on her, it all would have been over.

Afterward, they used Vlad's window to learn what was happening in the settlement.

Izabella shook her head and turned her gaze skyward. She whispered, her voice choked with bewilderment.

"Who would have dreamed that they would use the Sand Queen's corpse like that…? I mean, that's the object of their worship. How could they even think of doing something so blasphemous? I can't even begin to wrap my head around it. It all just seems so unbelievable."

"I can certainly see it seeming that way, especially to you. But I daresay you have it backward."

"…How so?"

"Desecrating the Sand Queen's corpse is a grave taboo, aye. But that's precisely why the idea came to them. The mental weight of betraying everything cast the thing they were supposed to protect most of all in a brand-new light. If they were already going to sacrifice everything for the sake of their race, then there was no need for half measures."

Elisabeth tried to conjure up an image of Aguina in her mind. However, she could no longer picture that sharp-tongued intellectual with any sort of accuracy. She had no idea what kind of expression he bore at the moment.

That fact was probably sad, all things considered.

At the moment, though, there were other issues that demanded her attention.

Once the Three Kings got injured, they would have begun beating a defensive retreat. Officially, though, I'm a traitor. My showing up would only serve to throw the human forces into disarray. I have to send Jeanne and Izabella back, move the crystal, and if at all possible, aid our side's retreat while remaining unnoticed…

Such thoughts were highly unbecoming of the Torture Princess. Well aware of that, Elisabeth laid her hand on the crystal. It was cold and hard against her palm. First things first, she began trying to think of somewhere to send it.

Then Jeanne spoke.

"There's something I really must ask, lady. What do you intend to do? The mixed-race folk have their sights set on the crystal, as do the masses. **Plus, everyone's got their asses all riled up now. *Plus*, the situation's changed, and you know what that means.**"

Given the current state of affairs, hiding the crystal for any prolonged amount of time would be nigh impossible.

The likelihood their foes would get their hands on Kaito Sena, as well as the danger if they did, had just gone through the roof.

*

Izabella picked up where Jeanne left off.

“With the beastfolk’s help, it would probably be possible to find somewhere safe to put the crystal. But with the Three Kings of the Forest injured, there’s a real danger that Sir Kaito Sena will end up being used as a bargaining chip. The situation really is different now. And whether we have the crystal or not, our enemies aren’t going to hold back anymore.”

At the moment, scores of people were dying over in the settlement. Every second counted. However, the two of them were willing to expend that precious time asking Elisabeth about her intentions. That was simply how large of a threat the prospect of God and Diablo falling into enemy hands was.

Elisabeth quietly returned Izabella’s gaze and nodded. She was all too aware of that.

The information has already leaked once, and no plan is ever perfect. Even if I hide it somewhere only I know, there’s a limit to the range of unexpected situations I can deal with. There’s no way to totally guarantee the crystal’s safety.

That meant that at the moment, the best course of action would be to destroy it.

However, that was something Elisabeth refused to do. And besides, there was something else she knew, too.

On a long enough timeline, even that would amount to folly.

Even if they destroyed the vessel and returned God and Diablo to their higher plane, someone would eventually just summon them again.

When that happened, it would truly mark the end of days.

In time, the world would surely be destroyed.

“If we smash it, a new contractor will eventually rise up anyhow. They already figured out how to make the Fremd Torturchen, and with each experiment a talented mage performs, the day of destruction grows that much closer. The only way to achieve true equilibrium is to free this world from God and Diablo and to end the cycle of creation and destruction altogether.”

The problem was, how?

Elisabeth knew the risks involved, and she knew she couldn’t do it alone. As she got to work drawing the teleportation circle to her chosen destination, she prepared to explain her plan. But then she heard it.

To. Fro. Chitter. Chatter.

There was a voice.

It was a young girl singing, her voice loud and full of pride. She called out, her tone that of a person dashing through a field with deranged abandon and laughing their head off. “Holy, Holy, Holy!” she cried. “Lord God Almighty!

“Thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever.

“Amen.

“Hallelujah.”

Elisabeth could definitely make out someone whispering. A chill ran down her spine. She didn’t know why, but she felt as though she had just been asked to do the impossible. That she’d just been given a perverse order.

Until the day of your death, try to do some good at least.

And if you cannot do good, then die.

Then someone continued that thought in a strangely childish voice.

“So if you say that God, too, should perish…”

Then doesn’t that mean the world should perish?

Wouldn’t that be the greatest good of all?

Suddenly, Elisabeth recalled the sight of a young saint’s eyes.

So much had happened since then that the memory was a bit foggy. But the hatred in those eyes had been something else.

Apparently, the saint’s explanation was that her body had moved on its own when she saw the danger Izabella was in. However, that didn’t explain the intense emotion she had expressed. And that wasn’t all.

Izabella had probably only told Kaito Sena’s location to a few trusted confidantes. That way, the information wouldn’t have been lost with her if she failed her mission. But no matter how tight-lipped a paladin was, there was one type of person they would always willingly divulge anything to. After all, the saints were the most respected people in the Church.

Realization shot through Elisabeth like a bolt of lightning.

She knew who had leaked the location to Alice’s men.

Suddenly, Izabella looked up. After looking around, she gave a relaxed greeting.

“Hmm? Who goes…? Ah, pardon my rudeness. Might I ask what brings you—?”

“Izabella, you fool! Get back!”

However, Elisabeth’s shout came too late.

At some point, a girl with dead eyes had appeared before them.

Her slender legs were bound, but without a word, she unfastened all her restraints.

When she did, the wounds on her pale legs opened up, revealing the rows of saliva-covered teeth inside her flesh. A snake slithered out from within their warm darkness. Then, with a flash of light, it shot toward Izabella’s throat.

Elisabeth conjured a shield of darkness. However, the divine beast shattered her hastily improvised defense with ease.

Izabella’s half-mechanical face froze in shock.

Then the divine beast bit deep into human flesh.

Namely, the back of *Jeanne’s* neck.

*

“J-Jeanne…?”

“Rgh… Gah… Well, that stings…like a bitch…”

“That won’t do. Won’t, won’t, won’t do. That won’t do.”

Izabella let out a dumbfounded cry. As she did, Jeanne’s groan and the saint girl’s words came in unison.

As she whispered, the girl slowly rocked from side to side.

Sure enough, her eyes burned with an intense hatred. The mouths on her legs wriggled and squirmed in accordance with the saint’s quiet fury. Several more divine snakes poked their heads out of the openings.

They emanated a slithering sound, as though trying to imitate the real things.

Meanwhile, Izabella’s confusion grew ever deeper.

“B-but why? Why…why would a saint such as yourself…? Jeanne? Jeanne!”

The Torture Princess clicked her tongue. Izabella was too straitlaced to understand what was going on.

For now, that made her useless. Upon reaching that verdict, Elisabeth moved to provide the other two with cover and squared off against the young saint on her own. The girl’s skin was deathly pale, and she was still rocking from side to side.

She directed a quiet whisper at Elisabeth.

“You. I, knew it… Ever since, I heard, you were moving the crystal. I knew, you would reach that blasphemous conclusion. Because that’s all you have. You want, to cut Him off.”

“…Interesting. I see your mind’s clear enough when it comes to matters involving God, then.”

“You want to, separate the world from God, and take us saints, and cut off our connections to Him, don’t you?”

The young saint’s head slumped to the side at an odd angle.

Elisabeth raised both eyebrows. The girl had her pegged.

She was right—Elisabeth wanted to find a way to free the world from the system that was God and Diablo. That was the only way to save the people who lived in it.

To those two higher entities, their world was nothing more than a castle of sand.

As things currently stood, stability would remain forever beyond their reach.

Elisabeth unashamedly explained her theory to the saint.

“And what’s so wrong about that? At the end of the day, God and Diablo are naught but natural mechanisms! Entities that do nothing but repeat their cycle of creation and destruction! ’Twas man that decided God worth worshipping, but both of them are terrifying in equal measure! Why is it, then, that you cling so steadfastly to your connection with it?!”

“No, *no*… I—I, you see. I, believed, in God. Believe, in God. Believed, really, reeeeally hard. But ever, since, my legs, were blessed with, these holy wounds, my memories, have, been really, spotty, you see? But, you see. There was someone, who believed, even if salvation wasn’t coming. He, I mean—he—”

Suddenly, the saint’s voice began to tremble. For once, she was whining in a manner befitting a girl her age.

Large tears glistened in her eyes. Elisabeth was struck silent. The vast majority of saints had had all but the barest of human emotions stripped from them, but the girl before her was crying in unmistakable grief.

“He said it, right through to the end. That God was with him. He said that God was with him!”

“…Wait, you know of La Christoph’s final moments?”

“I do! I— We, we all do! We’re all, the same. We all believe in God, and we all love God, so, so, so why? Why would you take Him away?”

The girl shouted as she cried. However, her expression itself never changed. The tears merely streamed down her cheeks. She was heartbroken, just as anyone would be if someone they loved was on the verge of being killed.

Whether she wanted to or not, Elisabeth could tell. Compared to the Torture Princess, who was fighting for a brand of justice disconnected from any worldly desires, the girl’s stance was almost more respectable. She had faith in God, belief in her compatriots, and sorrow for those she’d lost.

In fact, she probably didn’t even care.

She didn’t even care that her prayers were going unheard.

She didn’t care that God was just a name they’d affixed to an utterly alien entity.

She’s driven by a simple love of God, so explaining to her that God is unnecessary will never get through.

It was as a child loved their parent

or as a parent loved their child

or as anyone would rail against having someone they needed ripped from their bosom.

And because of that, Elisabeth spoke.

“See, I can scarce think of anything further beneath my interest.”

For to her, that was something

that didn’t matter in the slightest.

*

Nothing in the world was wrong or mistaken anymore.

After all, justice, righteousness, and goodness had all been lost.

For instance, how could anyone truly come up with answers?

Was the mixed-race people's hatred just? Was the beastfolk's fury just? Was the demi-humans' desperate struggle just?

If you asked any of them why they did what they did, they'd all give you the same answer.

It was the only choice we had. But that wasn't true, now was it?

They could have always choked back their hatred and fury. And they could have always just shut up and let themselves be killed. But they rejected that tragedy. Instead of staying silent, they reached for swords. They refused to let themselves fall victim to tyranny.

They chose to fight for something.

And once that choice was made, they had to see their conviction through to the end.

The girl believed that the world needed God.

Elisabeth had decreed that it didn't.

That was all. There was no good there, nor was there evil. And right and wrong didn't even begin to factor in.

"As such…"

"—!"

"…I shall cut you down. Go now to your end, with belief in your heart and hatred for me on your lips."

Having already stepped forward, Elisabeth held the Executioner's Sword of Frankenthal aloft. But the moment before the blade met its target, the wounds on the girl's legs loudly opened up.

Inside, hundreds of teeth sat in shiny rows, like she had undergone some sort of macabre surgery.

The mouths laughed as one.

Then light gushed from their throats like vomit. A massive serpent wrapped itself around the girl, so large it seemed almost to be strangling her. Elisabeth carefully adjusted the tip of her blade to aim at a gap between its coils.

The serpent writhed and it reared its many heads.

Then, all at once

the deadly balance was broken.

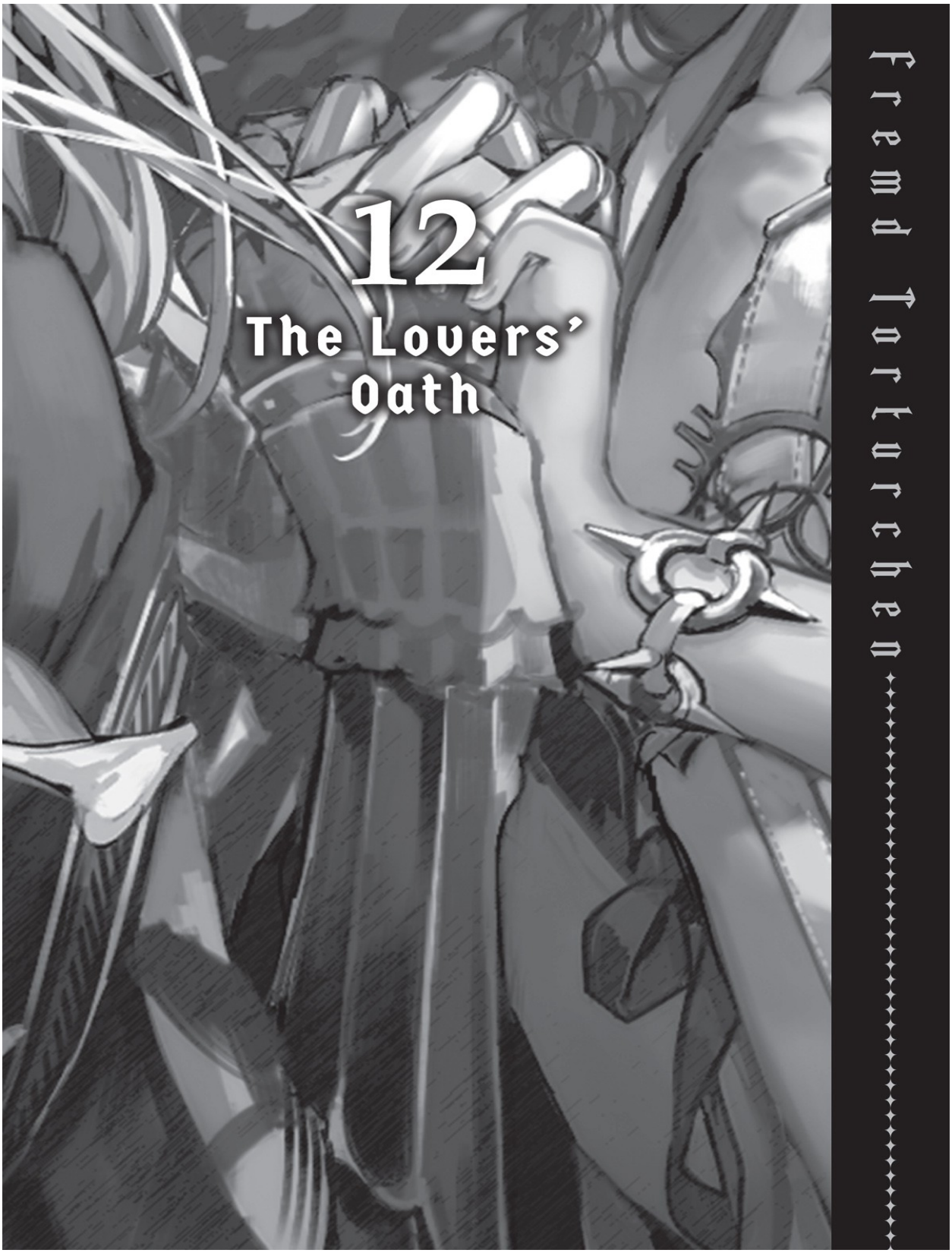
"The thing is, people's worth lies solely in their value as playthings. And your faith is uninteresting to me. Begone from my sight."

A voice boomed out that sounded almost human, and a presence of overwhelming darkness made its appearance.

Sensing imminent danger, Elisabeth stopped in her tracks, then quickly leaped backward.

And with a single sweep of the Kaiser's mighty tail

the frail young saint was sent flying.



12
The Lovers' Oath

Fremd Torturchen

12
The Lovers' Oath

There was no change to the chessboard in that red room.

Just a bestial piece that should have vanished, still moving around.

And another piece, one that was covered in blood. The second piece had no effect on the board as a whole.

And yet even so, someone was crying.

"You're so important to me," they were saying. "I want you by my side. Even if the world doesn't need you there.

"Please.

"I'm begging you."

*

"…Kaiser?"

"Ha, and what a sorry state you're in. To think that the self-proclaimed Torture Princess would nearly let herself get eaten by a divine beast."

The Kaiser laughed, mocking her from the bottom of his heart. Elisabeth frowned.

The question was, why was he there? Behind him, the saint's limbs lay broken and twisted in all the wrong directions, and the wounds on her legs were closed up so tight it was like they weren't even there. She clearly wasn't getting back up any time soon.

Elisabeth had been saved. However, the Kaiser's very existence was a mystery.

Vlad is dead.

By all rights, his contract should have died with him.

Elisabeth started to ask for an explanation, but the Kaiser shook his jaw at her in preemptive annoyance.

"Now, it seems to have slipped your mind, but…do you not care what happens to the other girl?"

"…Ah! Jeanne!"

Elisabeth whirled around. He was right—now was no time for questions.

Jeanne had just had her neck torn open. And given how deep the wound was, it was doubtful she'd be able to close it properly.

Elisabeth rushed over to the golden girl.

Izabella was cradling her.

It was like a scene straight out of a fairy tale. The golden princess was in the knight's arms, eyes closed as though sleeping. Her luxurious honey-

blond hair was splayed out and reached all the way to the ground. However, much of it was stained a grim shade of crimson.

Izabella desperately tried to maintain pressure on the neck wound.

“Elisabeth, the blood… There’s so much blood! What do we do? Oh, Jeanne…”

“There’s no need to cry like that, my lady… It’s a damn waste of that pretty li’l face of yours.”

Jeanne opened her eyes and reached out with her bloodstained hand. She made to stroke Izabella’s cheek but stopped at the last moment. Not wanting to soil what little skin Izabella’s face had left, she slowly returned her arm to her side.

Then it was Izabella who reached out. She grabbed Jeanne’s hand and pressed it against her cheek. Large tears rolled down over Jeanne’s tiny palm. One after another, the clear drops cascaded to the ground.

Jeanne’s eyes widened a little. She spoke in an unhurried tone.

“How very sweet of you. Heh, I wouldn’t mind droppin’ dead right here and now.”

“Please, you mustn’t say things like that. I’m begging you.”

“This place…really does bring back memories. Both then and now, ain’t never been nothin’ but death here.”

Upon hearing that, Elisabeth took another look around.

Jeanne had a point. This was Jeanne de Rais’s birthplace, a cradle built specifically to raise her. And so, too, was it the graveyard where the alchemists had sacrificed themselves.

Jeanne’s rose-red gaze flitted about their surroundings. The crucified corpses that had once decorated the area were no longer anywhere to be seen.

She looked back at Izabella and let out a small breath.

“Everyone lives knowing that death will someday take them. To the people here, I was nothing but a puppet meant to massacre them all. **‘Grant us our wish, O Torture Princess,’ they said. ‘Send us to our eternal rest.’ That’s so messed up! I mean, if you’re dying, your dreams ain’t worth shit. They’re just a burden, weighing down the livin’…** I won’t speak ill of their pride itself, but they could have stood showing their emotions a little more. But now there’s nothing but death here, and—”

“Jeanne, that’s enough! Please don’t say any more. You’re making your wound worse. You—”

“But you…you were always so warm.”

Jeanne slowly closed her eyes. Her lips curled into a smile.

Elisabeth thought back. Jeanne’s crass manner of speaking was something she’d picked up from a group of bandits she went and captured, but the alchemists themselves hadn’t taught her a thing about how to express emotions.

And yet in spite of that, and in spite of the blood she was drenched in, she was looking up at Izabella with a gaze full of heartfelt adoration.

As Izabella's tears rolled over her palms, Jeanne thoroughly mulled over every word as she spoke.

"Even with so much machinery in you… Even after what I *did* to you, you're still so warm."

"Don't say it like that—you *saved* me. I, you…you bring so much warmth into my life as well… Please, you can't die on me. Don't die. I'm begging you!"

Izabella squeezed Jeanne's hand even tighter than before. She was crying like a child, tears gushing from her blue and purple eyes. The way she embraced Jeanne, it was like she was desperately trying to pin her to the mortal coil. She buried her face in Jeanne's honey-blond hair and whispered.

"I'm begging you, my love."

"…Say what?"

And for her troubles

she got back an incredulous cry.

*

"O-oh, goodness."

Elisabeth reflexively stepped back.

Now she was worried about what was to come for a completely different reason than she had been before.

Jeanne jerked her torso all the way vertical in a highly inadvisable maneuver for someone on death's door.

Elisabeth took another step back. Her intuition had been right on the mark. As for Jeanne herself, though, Izabella commanded the sum total of her attention. Jeanne's rose-red eyes were as wide as dinner plates.

She spoke in an unnervingly serious tone.

"Again."

"J-Jeanne, that's not important, your wound—"

"Please repeat what you just said."

"Wh-which part?"

"'My…'"

"…My love?"

And with that, Jeanne died.

No, wait, she just toppled over backward.

Izabella cried out, frantically supporting her back and embracing her. Her tone rang with desperation.

"Please, my love, you have to stay with me!"

As Elisabeth listened to the dead-serious plea, she gave the two of them an askance look. Despite being a dog, the Kaiser's expression was much the same as hers. Then Jeanne abruptly sat up again.

She, too, sounded scarily serious, but her tone was bewildered in equal measure.

"My lady, might it be the case that you, um, well, perhaps think of me… in *that* light? **Y'know, kinda sorta maybe like lovers?**"

"…Forget what I think—I already *am* your lover, am I not?"

Jeanne died.

Oh, enough of that already, Elisabeth silently retorted.

*

"Ah," Jeanne said, then rose with surprising ease.

However, she gave that no follow-up.

Her mouth flapped open and closed, but her voice refused to come out. However, the cause wasn't exactly medical in nature. She then repeated the whole process several times, making it look like she was performing some sort of heretical ritual dance.

A moment after she finished, she launched into a barrage of questions.

"But then why do you never act like it? One day you're kind to me, the next you seem wholly uninterested, and some days you barely even greet me. **How many fuckin' beastfolk doors do you think I've had to smash down just so I could get some damn advice?!**"

"You know, I'm still waiting for you to apologize about that," Elisabeth noted.

"Can it, bitch. One thing at a time."

"…Y-you were smashing down doors? Anyhow, I thought that changing my lifestyle and behavior just because I was in a relationship would come across as insincere, but…if it made you feel insecure, then I was putting the cart before the horse. I'm truly sorry."

Izabella scratched her cheek and gave Jeanne an apologetic bow. Jeanne began vibrating. Her expression couldn't keep up with all the powerful emotions welling up inside her, and as she shouted, she seemed liable to explode at any moment.

"But you never answered my c-c-confession!"

"I did! I told you, 'I've acknowledged your feelings, and I appreciate them.' If I was turning you down, I would have said so!"

"Surely you could have picked something a little more romantic, you dumbass! *Fuck* I love you!"

Meanwhile, Elisabeth and the Kaiser shared an inane little exchange of their own.

"That girl is quite something… Even her normal speech is starting to sound like that."

"What do you mean by 'like that,' Kaiser?"

“You know, I’m not quite sure myself.”

Elisabeth couldn’t begin to tell if Jeanne was acting angry or being bashful or what. All she knew for sure was that Jeanne was puffing up her cheeks and swaying side to side. That was when Elisabeth realized something.

The wound on Jeanne’s neck was completely healed.

A small piece of metal had come off Izabella’s hand and carefully sealed up the fang wound. Like Waltz, it was a technique that only the two of them could have pulled off.

Ah, Elisabeth thought, satisfied.

There really hadn’t been a need to cry.

Izabella was still worried about Jeanne’s wound, but she steeled her resolve all the same. She had caused her lover to worry, and no person half as earnest as her would be able to forgive themselves for something like that.

She reverently took Jeanne’s hand in hers. Then, as Jeanne went still, she pressed her lips against Jeanne’s fingers. It was beautiful and heartwarming, like a scene plucked straight out of a fairy tale.

Izabella then spoke, the words coming from the bottom of her heart.

“My dearest beloved. You cast aside your weapon for me, saved me, sacrificed yourself for me, and fell from the sky into my arms. And in that moment, you were the most beautiful star I had ever seen—a light that shone for me and me alone. I ask of you this: Will you stay by my side for the rest of our days?”

Jeanne shook violently and nearly keeled over. It was far too much for her heart to take. However, she valiantly fought to stay upright.

In spite of herself, Elisabeth found it somewhat impressive. This time, it was Izabella who had gone a bit overboard.

Jeanne, not sure how to respond, lapsed back into her strange heretical dance. She squeezed her fists and eyes tightly shut.

In the end, she shouted but a single word.

“Marriage!”

“Of course! We’ll have a big ceremony in the Capital!”

The two of them exchanged a firm embrace. *Hmm*, Elisabeth thought.

Technically, Jeanne *had* been in a life-threatening situation.

And now the two lovers had both successfully survived.

Not only that, they’d finally managed to communicate their feelings to each other. Jeanne cried in joy, and Izabella gently stroked her fair back. Viewed objectively, the whole situation was downright moving.

However, both members of the audience felt as though they’d been left completely in the dust.

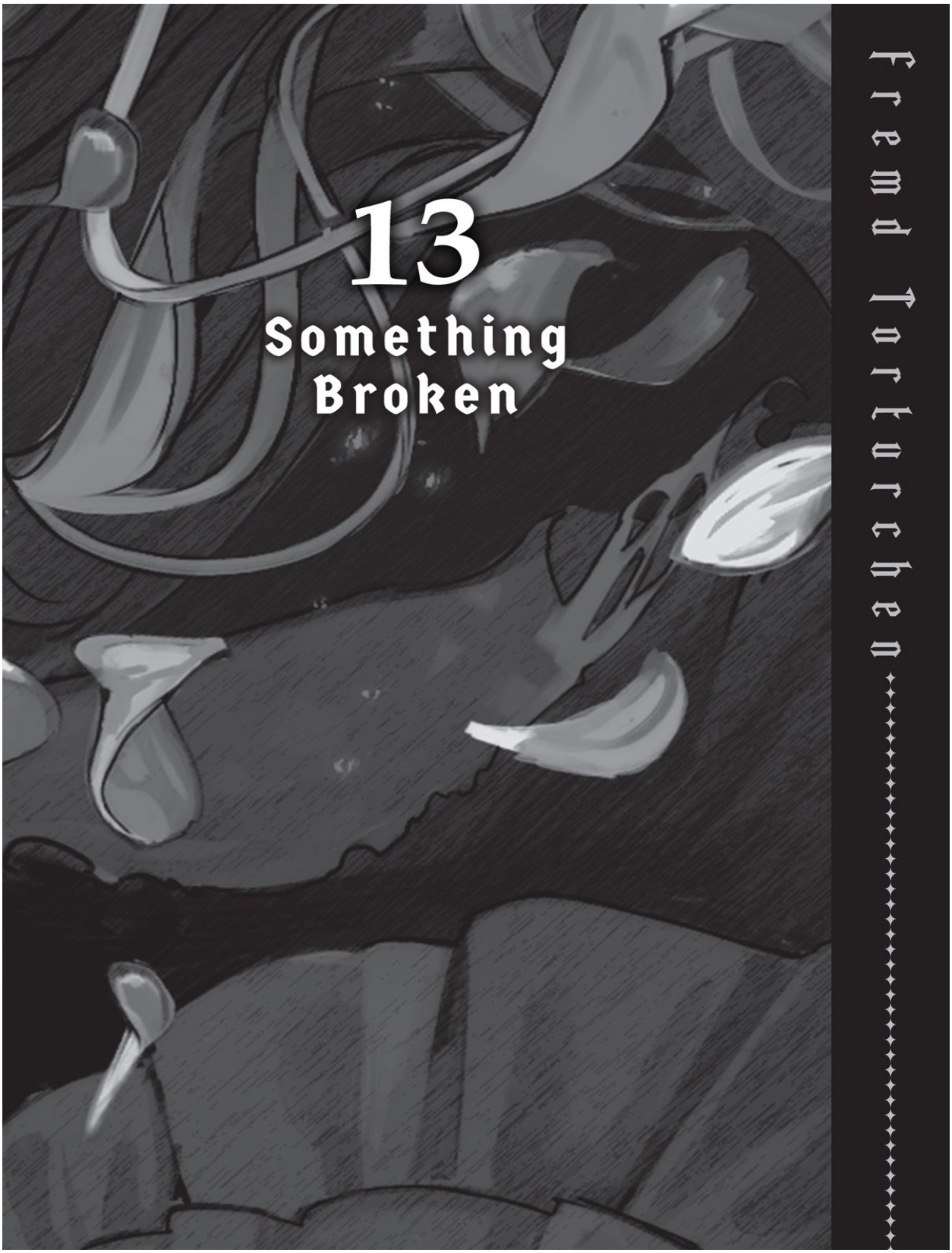
Elisabeth shook her head from side to side.

Then she looked over at the Kaiser and shot him a question.

“What exactly did I just witness?”

“Hell if I know.”

And at the end of the day
there was really no other way to put it.



13
Something Broken

13
Something Broken

At that point

anyone who saw what was atop the chessboard

in that red, red room

would surely cry out. “Oh God, it’s horrible.” “What did I just see?!” “You saw it, too, right? That girl’s eyes?” “Please, someone, anyone, make her close them.” “I feel like I just got cursed.”

*

It was a later time and, moreover, a different place. Namely, the royal castle.

Specifically, the chamber that sat before the Room of Pain on the underground tomb’s lowest level.

Watched over by the rows of coffins and generations of deceased royalty stood two people.

Elisabeth Le Fanu and Maclaeus Filliana.

The Torture Princess and the human king.

Officially speaking, the Torture Princess was on the Most Wanted list, meaning their rendezvous was by necessity a clandestine one. That was what made that section of the tomb such a perfect spot—because the kings’ corpses were interred there, the entire chamber was sealed off. Even with the death of its former Grave Keeper, Vlad Le Fanu, it was unlikely that anyone else would come down.

There, the only company was the dead.

A large crystal gleamed under the room’s hemispherical ceiling. The dappled light it cast made the entire room look like the bottom of a pool.

Even so, though, it was still dim, and their expressions were grave.

Elisabeth spoke first, her tone detached.

“How many dead?”

“We don’t have hard numbers yet, but it looks to be over a third. The situation is grim.”

Elisabeth nodded. If anything, that was lower than she’d expected. She thought back.

After returning to the settlement, Jeanne and Izabella had aided in the retreat, as had Elisabeth, albeit from the shadows. By that point, though, many of the beastfolk and humans had already made their escape.

That was thanks to some decisive action from the Three Kings of the Forest, who had quickly decided to devote their full efforts toward

protecting the survivors. Furthermore, the Sand Queen didn't pursue them particularly far. The mixed-race people had wanted to give chase, but the Queen herself refused.

Her priority had been protecting the demi-human settlement.

Apparently, the mana in her corpse had taken on some of her personality.

And as a mother, that personality was intent on protecting her children.

It was also unclear whether or not Satisbarina's son had survived, but at the moment, that was the least of their worries, and they didn't exactly have the means to look into it anyway. Most of the dead beastfolk and humans had yet to even be identified.

And then there were those who'd been reduced to ash, those who would forever be listed as missing in action.

"The beastfolk trump card was bested, our foes have obtained a new weapon…and the Fremd Torturchen grew stronger still. We were successful in slaying Lewis, but even so, 'tis unclear which way the scales will tip."

Elisabeth crossed her arms. Their overwhelming advantage had been overturned in the blink of an eye.

Now it was impossible to say which of the scale's plates weighed heavier.

Everything was in absolute chaos.

This is what happened when rage was met with rage. The two would clash, and sparks would go flying every which way.

Now the true battle, the one they'd anticipated all along, was beginning.

The curtain had raised on a grand, all-encompassing war.

And ironically, it was a war nobody had ever wanted. Even the mixed-race people would be hard-pressed to say that this was the outcome they had sought. Elisabeth shook her head. Then she posed another question.

"…I know not her name, but last I saw, that saint girl was still alive. What became of her?"

"If it's La Filsell you're asking about, she's resting in a Church clinic. She fractured half the bones in her body and suffered serious organ damage, but she narrowly escaped death. I hear that La Dhruv—a fellow saint whose divine beasts take the form of fish—is keeping her company as she recovers."

"…The saints sympathize with her?"

"By and large, yes. But many of them are condemning her actions and calling her attack on Jeanne de Rais uncalled for. I don't foresee this causing any problems with our ability to secure their assistance. They understand what La Christoph stood for and how he viewed salvation."

…Do they, though?

Privately, Elisabeth wasn't so sure about that.

For many of the saints, having their prayers granted left their bodies horribly disfigured.

To them, God was all they had. It wouldn't be strange in the slightest if more of them resisted the prospect of having their connection to Him severed. These were people who didn't even have families. If anything, it would be strange for them *not* to balk at losing the one absolute bond in their lives.

It was impossible for outsiders to understand just how alone saints were and how important their faith was to them.

Suddenly, Elisabeth turned her gaze to the wall farther in.

There was a carving there of the Saint embracing a blob of meat swaddled in cloth. And beside her stood her demi-human servant.

He, too, had ended his life while blindly believing in his mother. However, he left the world without a single regret.

Elisabeth wordlessly shook her head.

She turned her gaze back away from the carving and began thinking.

A way to sever our connection to God and Diablo, eh…?

Due to the fuss around Izabella and Jeanne's engagement, Elisabeth had almost missed her chance to explain her plan to them. But explain it she did, and she was set on carrying it out. It was unclear if it would actually work or not, but she knew she had to go for it.

Even if doing so

would end up sending her to her eternal rest.

*

Maclaeus cast his dull green eyes downward.

That information was precisely why he had sought that meeting with Elisabeth out.

He hesitantly spoke.

"I heard about your plan from Vicker… Are you serious about that?"

"Aye. You've realized, too, I imagine? That until we're freed from the system of God and Diablo, we shall never obtain true peace. Not until the end of time."

Maclaeus's expression darkened when he heard the certainty in Elisabeth's tone. Patterns of light from the crystal danced on his face. Deep down inside, that was something he already knew. Mankind's sole available path was both treacherous and paved with blasphemy.

The Torture Princess thought back to the plan she'd laid out right before teleporting away from Jeanne's birthplace.

The first hurdle they had to clear was also going to be the hardest.

We have to capture Fremd Torturchen Alice Carroll, otherwise known as Sara Yuuki, transfer just Kaito Sena's contract with Diablo into her body, then kill her.

In other words, they would return Diablo to whence it came.

That would leave only God behind.

After that, even if someone managed to summon Diablo, they could use God to keep it in check.

Then, if they eventually developed the ability to perfectly control God's power without having it run amok, it would be possible to rid the world of Diablo's influence for good.

All they needed to do that was to get God to recognize its every act of violence, including the lesser demons' acts of destruction, as "destruction carried out before the reconstruction."

That way, God would reject them as being violations of the system. And with Diablo unable to commit acts of destruction, God's ability to influence the world would be severed in turn.

Once that happened, the world would be free from its role as the higher beings' sandcastle.

The infinite cycle of being endlessly destroyed and constructed anew would finally end.

The one rub was that no mage alive had the power to completely control God.

Their only choice was to stake their future on finding a solution to that issue during the reprieve that temporarily getting rid of Diablo would buy them. It was a dangerous gamble, to be sure. However, mankind had already come up with a way to create the Fremd Torturchen. It would probably involve straying from the straight and narrow, but odds were good that there were other such innovative techniques just waiting to be discovered.

Someday, that hurdle would be cleared, too. The bigger problem was the here and now.

Too many people knew that Kaito Sena was the vessel, so leaving God with him was too great a risk.

As such, I have no choice but to make a contract with the Kaiser, grow my power through battle, and become God's vessel myself. With Kaito Sena left behind... The amount of mana he's amassed towers head and shoulders over that of any other. Keeping me hidden will be child's play for him. It will wound him to have to do so, but...he'll have Hina by his side. I'm sure he'll be fine.

Elisabeth nodded as the image of that lovable maid flashed through her mind.

At the moment, they were storing the crystal outside the beastfolk lands. The beastfolk would want to point fingers for their historic defeat, and there was a fear that both Vyadryavka and the crystal itself would come under fire.

Right before moving it, Elisabeth laid out her thinking to everyone.

Izabella had hesitated for a moment, then replied simply, "It won't be easy." Jeanne just shrugged. And the Kaiser, as though filling in for Vlad, responded with exasperation. He shook his tail and laughed in that ever-so-human voice of his.

“Some God, getting dragged this way and that way and every other which way like that. Idiots, the lot of you. You know, I almost wonder what the greatest idiot I know would have thought of all this…”

Elisabeth didn’t have to wonder. Kaito Sena was going to be livid. *This isn’t what I wanted for you!* he would no doubt angrily cry. *What do you think it was I fought so hard for?!* However, the situation was different now.

She couldn’t protect him anymore.

Because of that, this was their only option.

Knowing that filled Elisabeth not with hesitation

but with an emotion that bore a strong resemblance to relief.

*

It was almost as though she actually *wanted* to lay down her burden.

However, Elisabeth chose to focus her attention away from that secret desire of hers. All that mattered was that her plan was the best one for the situation. If it didn’t change what she had to do, then how she felt about it didn’t much matter.

However, there was still an elephant in the room.

With Alice as she is, will we truly be able to capture her?

“I can see you’ve made up your mind… In that case, it’s paramount that we get a read on Alice Carroll’s movements. There’s a problem, though. At the moment, she’s completely vanished from the site of the settlement.”

“Aye, so she has. And I haven’t the faintest idea as to why.”

“It’s odd, isn’t it? Where could she have gone?”

Both of them had dropped their voices to whispers. They could feel it—something was terribly amiss about the whole situation.

Right after the humans and beastfolk made their retreat, one mystery had thrown everyone for a loop.

The disappearance of Alice Carroll.

And to muddy the waters even further, the first ones who’d begun searching for Alice were none other than the mixed-race people themselves. As it turned out, the scene from Vlad’s window was the last time anyone had actually laid eyes on her.

After that, she simply headed off somewhere without even telling her allies.

Elisabeth thought back to the way she’d screamed upon losing Lewis.

“How dare you. HOW DARE YOUUUUUUUUUUUUUU!”

That roar had been packed with more fury than should have even been possible. It was unclear what she intended to do next, but one thing was for certain. Her striking Vlad down was only the beginning.

Alice would never forgive them.

For just as I love Kaito Sena…

…Alice Carroll loved Lewis.

It was as a child loved their parent.

As a person loved another.

As one would love any whom they ought to love.

And as such, there could be no forgiveness.

Not for anyone.

Not ever.

Suddenly, Elisabeth realized that something was off.

Small specks of something were raining down on her shoulder.

She looked up in confusion, only to discover that small chunks of debris were falling from the ceiling. *Well, no matter then*, she thought and turned her gaze back down. A moment later, though, she let out a small gasp.

What was happening shouldn't have been possible.

That chamber had been crafted by the Saint herself. Even the finest of modern technology wouldn't have been able to replicate it, and its seamless walls boasted hardness unparalleled.

There was no reasonable way debris should have been falling from its ceiling.

The next moment, a violent tremor ran through the entire tomb.

Maclaeus lost his balance and nearly toppled over. He clung to a coffin for support and shouted.

"Wh-what…what's that?!"

"It's the surface! I can sense several sources of mana; this is—"

A chill ran down Elisabeth's entire body. This was no ordinary dark magic at play. She could sense powerful, malignant presences appearing one after another, each horrible and alien enough to qualify as a monster in their own right.

During a brief moment of relative quiet, Elisabeth took off at a dash.

Leaving Maclaeus behind, she threw the chamber's heavy doors ajar.

From there, she made for the stairs. Teleportation circles didn't work in the tomb, and although there were a number of spots designated for their use, she didn't have time to waste standing in line. Instead, she raced up the stairs alongside the paladins and Royal Knight guards doing the same. A handful of them noticed who she was, but none of them commented on that fact. They all just kept running.

All the while, the tremors continued, each one dashing Elisabeth against the wall. And they had only grown stronger by the time she reached the final set of stairs. Several people even lost their footing and went tumbling down backward. One knight was falling in a particularly dangerous-looking manner, so Elisabeth kicked him back upright as she made her way to the surface.

The moment she reached the entrance, she was greeted by the blinding light of day and a chorus of cries.

The voices were definitely human. However, they sounded as much like demons as anything else.

Eventually, she made her way outside

and discovered a whole new hell laid out before her.

*

A calamity cometh.

No

a calamity has come.

To all the people of the land.

The messenger blew the bugle of the end.

*

It’s time for a story.

Normally, when someone died a death as pitiful, unseemly, cruel, and gruesome as a worm getting stepped on, they didn’t get a second shot at life. It would be ridiculous to suggest that everyone simply got to go to the world of their dreams after they died.

To sum it up, the answer was simple. Miracles didn’t happen.

That was all there was to it.

Plus, even if they did get a second shot at life, sometimes all that awaited them were simply more horrors.

Right now, Elisabeth was learning that fact firsthand.

Pools of blackened crimson were spreading out all around the underground tomb. The pools, which looked like toxic swamps, were actually aberrant teleportation circles. They spread corrosively, paying no heed to the barrier the priests had set up around the entire Capital.

The ground frothed, like the earth itself was boiling.

Then several figures emerged through the circles, each more horrible than the circles themselves.

The figures were human. But so, too, were they weapons.

They had been transformed into fixed batteries.

And the treatment they’d undergone was crueler than even La Mules’s had been.

Their eyelids were stitched together, their tongues had been plucked out, their teeth had been removed, their limbs had been severed, and their bodies had been affixed to pillories.

And yet even so, they were still alive. All the fixed batteries were golems, which meant they were immortal as long as they didn’t suffer catastrophic blood loss. In other words, the fixed batteries…

…were the broken husks of what had once been reincarnations.

Elisabeth let out a faint murmur.

“…This is beyond the pale.”

Those were people who had no business even being in that world, all made to bear unbelievable burdens.

She had underestimated just how broken her late foe had been.

Summoning Alice had taught Lewis that his method worked. And because of that, he must have repeated the process, finishing up one reincarnation after another. However, he had only one heart to give.

That meant he could only make one Fremd Torturchen. If he tried to make more, it would only dilute the power each could command.

But then what to do with the rest of the people he summoned?

Worry not. There was no shortage of ways to put vessels with limitless mana to use.

For example, this.

He could assign demon contracts to the spare reincarnations willy-nilly, feed them pain, and expand their mana stores. From there, all he had to do was teach them how to shoot forward and train them to act on his signal.

That way, he could build himself a mighty fine collection of fixed batteries.

They had probably been in the proverbial shop up until then, which is why they hadn't been deployed earlier. Now, though, they were seeing their first live battle.

As far as that world was concerned, it marked the first time someone had taken another sentient person and made them into a living weapon without their consent.

The reincarnations' egos had been destroyed, but even so, the amount of hatred they fostered toward that world that had given them nothing but pain was downright terrifying. A bombardment poured from their mouths like both a wave of vomit and a chorus of screams.

They were calamities given flesh, spreading beams of absolute destruction wherever they faced. And all the while, their screams never ceased.

Nobody could so much as get close to them.

And standing at the center of all this was an adorable little girl.

Alice Carroll.

*

To. Fro. Chitter. Chatter.

There were voices.

Throngs of people sobbing and screaming and trembling. Someone was loudly screaming. There were no words, only pain. Someone else was lamenting the terror of it all, their tone that of a person dashing through a field with deranged abandon and laughing their head off. "What's even happening?"

And there, in that place that seemed halfway between a nightmare and reality, a young girl spoke.

"Come now, let's be good girls and sing a song.

"Humpty Dumpty sat on a wall! Humpty Dumpty had a great fall!

“All the king’s horses and all the king’s men couldn’t put Humpty together again.”

The one thing that truly can’t be put together again is this girl.

Alice Carroll was broken.

Elisabeth took a moment to let that fact sink in.

As she did, the girl stopped singing and slowly spun to face her.

The white, rabbit-ear-like ribbons attached to her oversized hat swayed from side to side. Just like before, Alice bent one knee in an elegant curtsy, and her white hair flopped adorably about.

Their surroundings had been reduced to a grim hellscape. This was the Wonderland Alice herself had built. However, the way Alice faced her was much the same as ever.

Alice spoke up.

“Come on, Elisabeth! Let’s plaaay!”

Her tone was bright and cheery.

It was as though she didn’t have a single care in the world.

Alice Carroll had broken past the point of no return.

Nobody could put her together again.

Elisabeth could tell that all this was happening because Lewis had been killed. But that wasn’t the whole story. The mixed-race people being killed had started it as well, as had Alice’s—that was, Sara Yuuki’s—brutal death.

By now, they were all avengers. Everyone hated everyone.

And the world kept on turning, just as properly as ever.

And in that moment, a thought crossed Elisabeth’s mind.

A thought she couldn’t afford to harbor.

…Why should Kaito have to protect a world such as this?

Why did the person she loved have to die?

Why, for something so *worthless*?

The expression vanished from Elisabeth’s face. However, she immediately dashed forward.

Hesitation wasn’t in the Torture Princess’s nature.

She did a forward roll, practically dancing her way across the field of death.

“Madam Elisabeth!” the knight she helped back on the stairs shouted. He rushed forward to try and back her up, but a blast struck him head-on and vaporized him in the blink of an eye. Elisabeth could tell what had happened, but she didn’t look back.

She knew that if she stopped, she would meet the same fate.

She ran with all her might. The blasts came in straight lines, so it was simple enough to dodge them. The fixed batteries almost resembled religious icons, and the Torture Princess deftly wove her way between them. As she pushed on forward, there was one thing she was sure of.

Alice needs to die.

She had become something that could not be allowed to continue living.

Killing her would ruin Elisabeth’s plan, but she was well past the point of worrying about that. She raced onward, eventually reaching her target.

Elisabeth drew her long sword from a swirl of black darkness and crimson flower petals. Her glossy hair swayed behind her as she appeared before the girl. Alice, for her part, was waiting for the Torture Princess without so much as a shred of fear.

Her arms were spread wide, and a broad smile sat plastered across her face.

It was like she was greeting a playmate

and for a moment, time seemed to stand still.

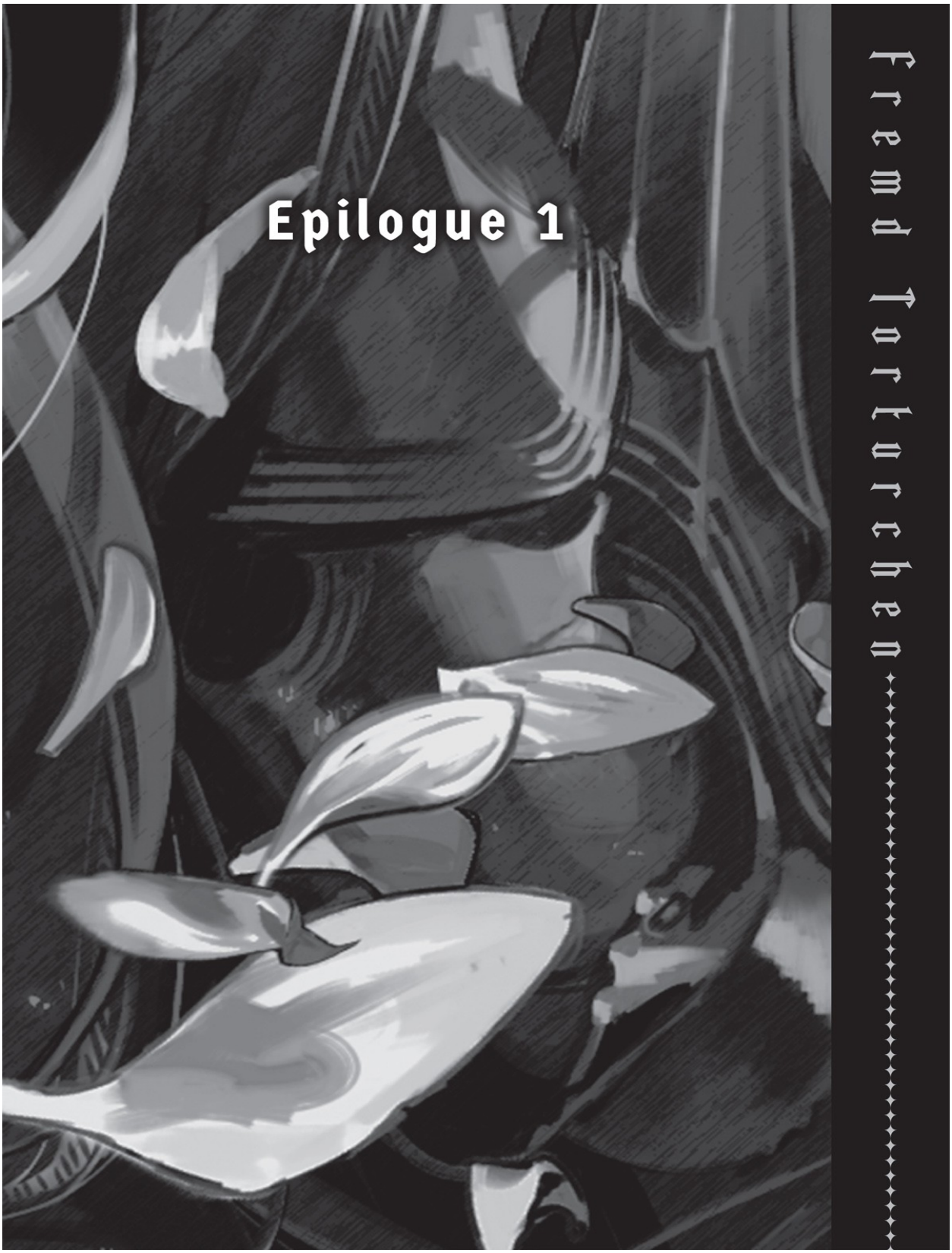
Elisabeth’s sword was raised aloft.

Alice had her spoon in hand.

Crimson and azure petals were cascading all around them.

The Torture Princess gathered all the rage swirling in her heart, then brought her sword down

and—



Epilogue 1

Epilogue 1

The room was red. It had no windows. It had no doors.

Nobody could leave it. And nobody could come in. It was almost like a graveyard. Or perhaps a prison.

And yet now its nonexistent door was open.

Kaito Sena slowly rose.

He no longer bothered to look at the chaotic chessboard. However, he did turn to the seat across from him and gently patted his bride's head. Hina gave him a small nod.

With that, Kaito Sena started walking. Hina called out toward his resolute back.

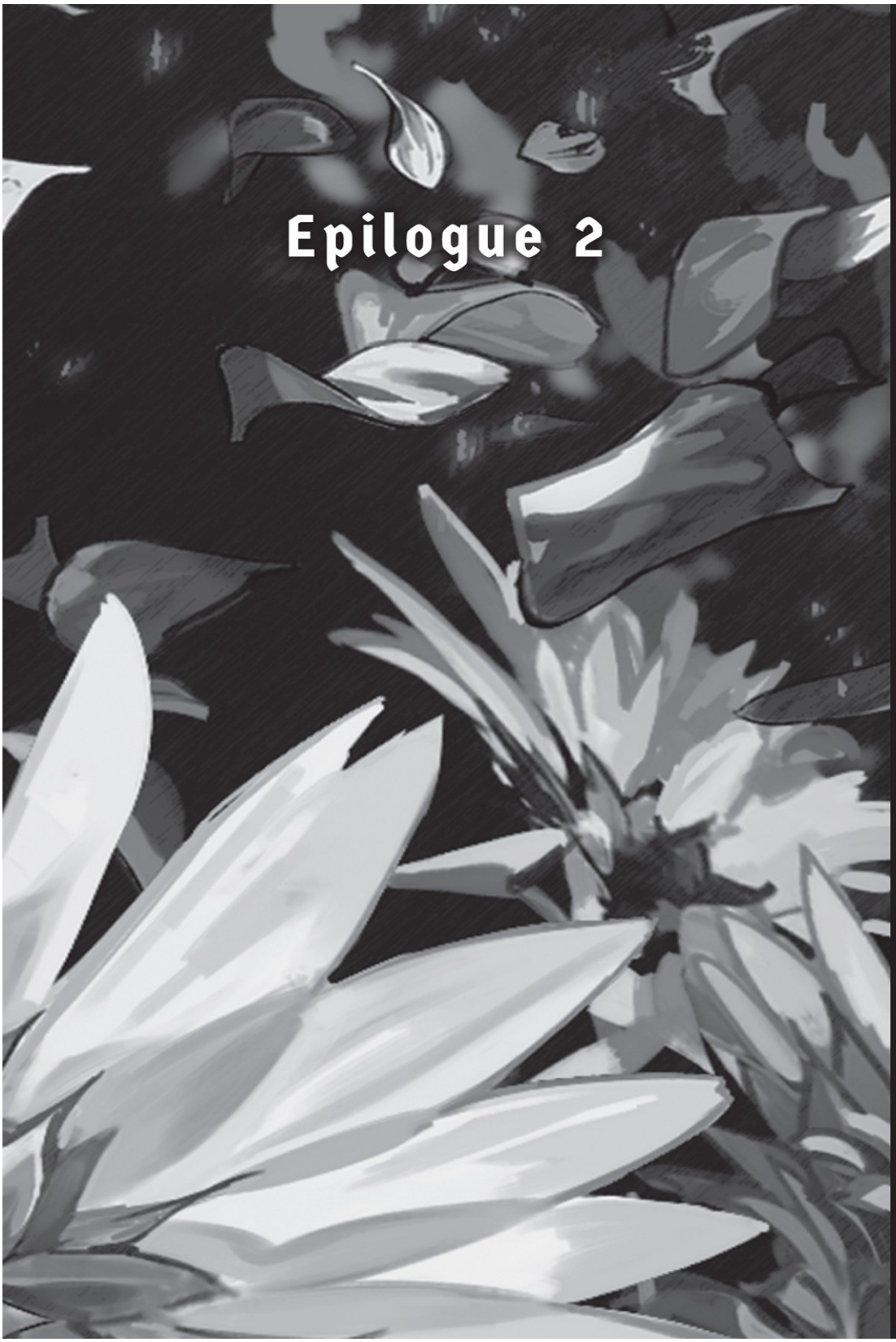
"You're going?"

"Yeah, I'm heading out."

"Well, good luck."

Then she went on:

"Please do give my love to our beloved."



Epilogue 2

Epilogue 2

Right before Elisabeth and Alice's blows met

someone reached out and caught them.

The ensuing gale force sent the person's tattered cloak flapping about. Their hood hung low, obscuring their face, but whoever they were, they had just caught the blades without so much as breaking a sweat.

Elisabeth frowned.

She could tell—if the person hadn't stepped in, she was the one whose chest would have been gouged out. She looked at the newcomer holding the blades. They really did resemble the Butcher…except for their hands.

Their hands were human.

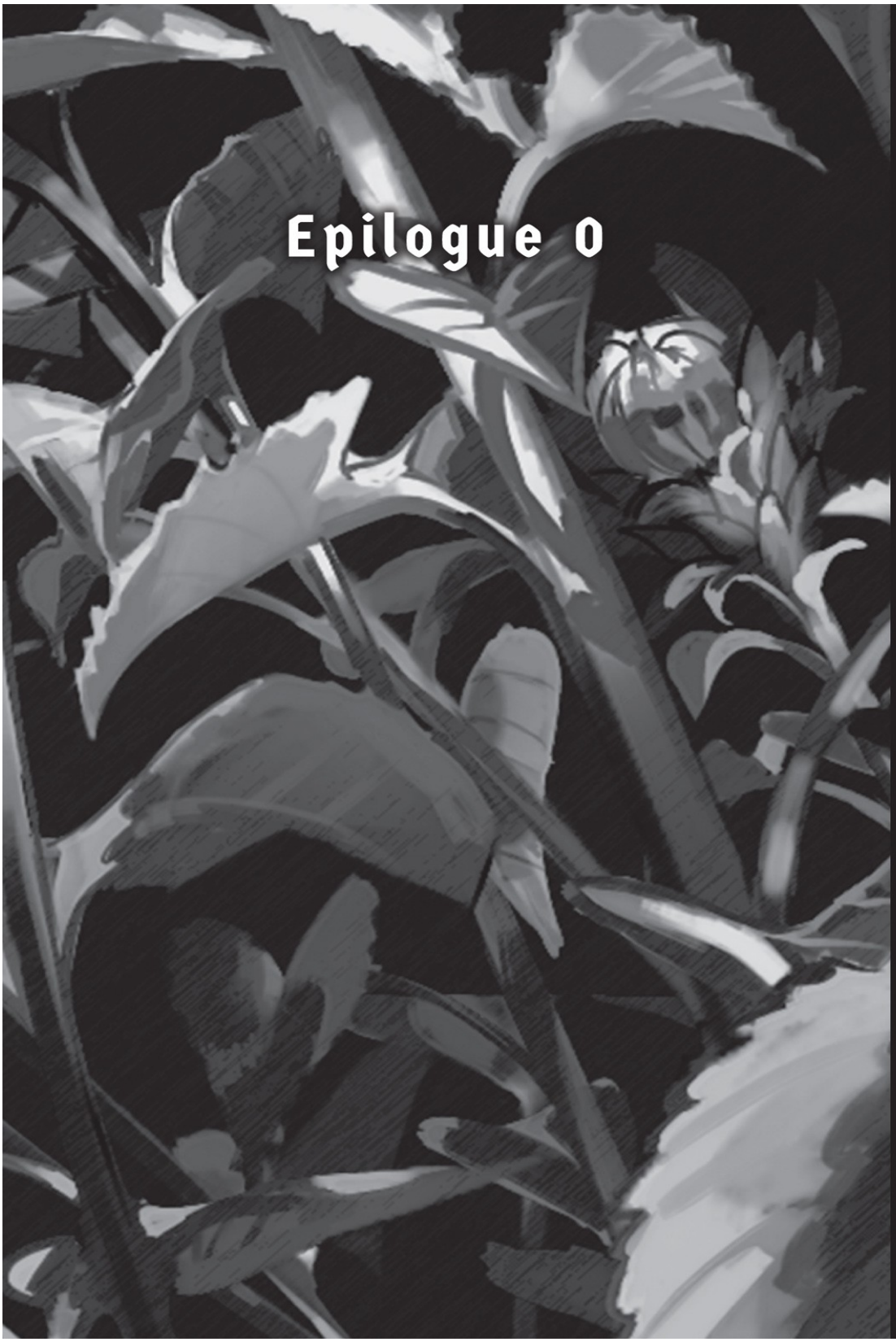
This time, she had no choice but to admit it.

A hot tear

casually rolled down the Torture Princess's cheek.

And with a thousand different emotions swelling up inside her, Elisabeth Le Fanu spoke.

"_____ Kaito, is that you?"



Epilogue 0

Epilogue 0

This is a story from a short while earlier.

A story of repentance, dreams, and hatred.

“This can’t be happening… This isn’t happening, is it, Father? It isn’t—it isn’t—it isn’t. Hee-hee, of course it isn’t.”

Lewis’s daughter let out a deranged laugh.

As Lewis’s guts spilled out of him, he felt a certain truth deep in his bones.

Vlad Le Fanu’s words had been completely true. At the end of the day, what Lewis had could hardly be described as paternal love. If being a good father had been his goal, then he’d gone about it in all the wrong ways.

If he truly loved her

then he should have comforted Sara Yuuki—Alice—and showered her with affection and support.

He should have chosen to just live, and each of them could have helped to heal the other’s scars.

And of course, he definitely shouldn’t have made any of those terrible weapons. They had been controversial even among the other mixed-race people, but Lewis couldn’t help himself. He made sure to sow every seed of revenge he could find.

He may have called Alice his daughter, but he certainly didn’t treat her like one. Unlike Vlad, Lewis had some semblance of morals, yet he had gone and made the Fremd Torturchen anyway. That was a sin that went beyond the pale.

There was no way for him to apologize. Not the slightest chance for atonement.

And the cruelest part of it all…

“I’m sorry. I’m so sorry. Even though I loved you, I still… I’m sorry, Alice.”

…was that his love was true.

To him, she was his joy.

She was his hope, his salvation, and his beloved daughter.

Meeting her was the first time Lewis had known joy. And the moment she became his daughter was the first time he learned what love was. That was all thanks to a single young girl. That was all thanks to her pure, innocent smile.

He still had time.

He still had a chance.

What message should he leave her with?

What was it he could only say now, in his final moments?

Lewis hesitated. However, his mind was being assailed by unrelenting heat and pain. He didn't know what to do. He didn't know what to say. He didn't know anything. Alice's smile became his sister's semen-drenched face, then his brother's hanged body. He remembered the day he held Alice tight as she sobbed during a nightmare. "I love you, Father." She smiled. "It's all your fault," his brother screamed. Family really was a beautiful thing. He wished he could have been with them longer, much longer. No, wait, he had a daughter now. Did he? He did. And so…

And…so?

Then

he spoke.

"Please, daughter, carry out my dream for me."

And with that, the foolish man died.

He remained a hopeless fool until the bitter end

knowing full well how irredeemable he was

even despite his love for his daughter.

*

His daughter looked up at the sky.

She was alone now. She blinked, her red eyes glowing from the fire all around her. Lewis hung motionless in her arms. His body was cold and hard. She gave a small, definite nod.

Young as she was, she knew.

This was what death was.

Now he was like she had once been.

And he would never move again.

Alice didn't cry. She merely parted her arms. Lewis's corpse crumpled to the ground, but she no longer paid it any heed. After all, it was nothing more than an object now.

Instead, she just looked up at the sky and laughed.

Happily, happily.

Merrily, merrily.

She laughed and laughed and laughed and spoke.

"I see, I see! Don't worry, Father. I understand completely!"

It’s time for everyone to die together!

Afterword

Hello, Keishi Ayasato here.

I don't know about you all, but my cat's been shedding like crazy this summer. Each time I looked down, I found I was covered in a sheet of white fur.

As for *Torture Princess*, it's finally reached Volume 8.

Dear me, how auspicious.

Of course, because of the way it ended, I felt like I was raising a death flag for myself just by writing it.

That said, it was also the volume where both I and Elisabeth came to understand what losing Kaito Sena truly meant, and I think I was able to convey everything I set out to in it.

I was also really happy about being able to write about what became of all sorts of different members of the cast. Now, I don't know if all of them are truly happy with how things turned out for them, but all I can really do is write clearly—and, to the best of my ability, compellingly—about the way they choose to live their lives, so that's what I'm going to keep doing from now on.

I hope I'll be able to do them justice in the next volume as well.

I hope you'll read it and bear witness to their destinies.

And I truly do hope you'll enjoy, even if only a little.

Now then, as is custom, I have some people I'd like to thank.

To Saki Ukai, for the breathtaking-as-always cover and all the other beautiful illustrations; to my editor O, for putting up with all the trouble I caused you this time; and to Hina Yamato, for the wonderful manga adaptation—I would like to thank you all so much. I'd also like to extend deep thanks to everyone else involved in the process, as well as my beloved family, particularly my sister. And more than anything, I would like to express my gratitude to my readers once more.

Looking back, *Torture Princess* has come quite a long way.

I fully believe that it's thanks to you all that the story was able to make it this far.

Thank you so much for accompanying me on this journey.

Now, I've mentioned this before on Twitter, and some of the clever ones among you probably realized on your own, but *Torture Princess* is structured in three-volume arcs.

Volumes 1 to 3 were the Foolish Servant arc, Part I.

Volumes 4 to 6 were the Foolish Servant arc, Part II.

And sure enough, Elisabeth's story, the Torture Princess arc, is going to last from Volumes 7 to 9.

So before I wrote Volume 6, I wrote up a three-volume plot outline that ended on Volume 9 and sent it over to my editor. In other words, what I'm saying is this:

Whenever there's a beginning, there must always be an end.

The next book will be the series finale.

It's going to pick up where Volume 8 left off and go full throttle until it hits the finish line, so I imagine it's going to be a bit of a challenge to write. But I intend to give it my all.

If you don't mind, I really hope you read it through to the end.

This I humbly beg of you.

There was something he once said.

"We gotta bring this story to an end."

There was something she once said.

"Would it not be better for a world such as this simply to end?"

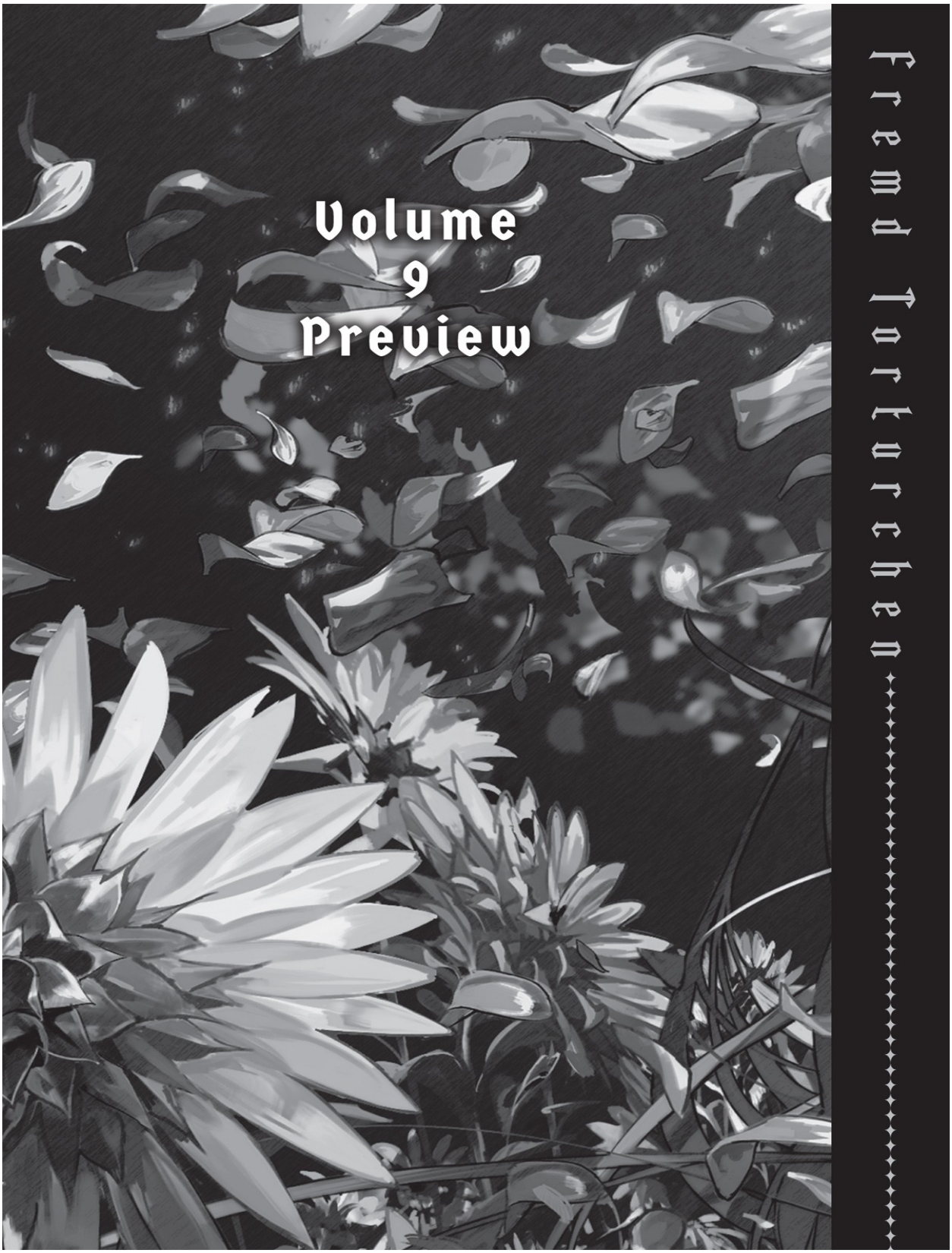
There was something she once said.

"Please, you must protect this world of yours."

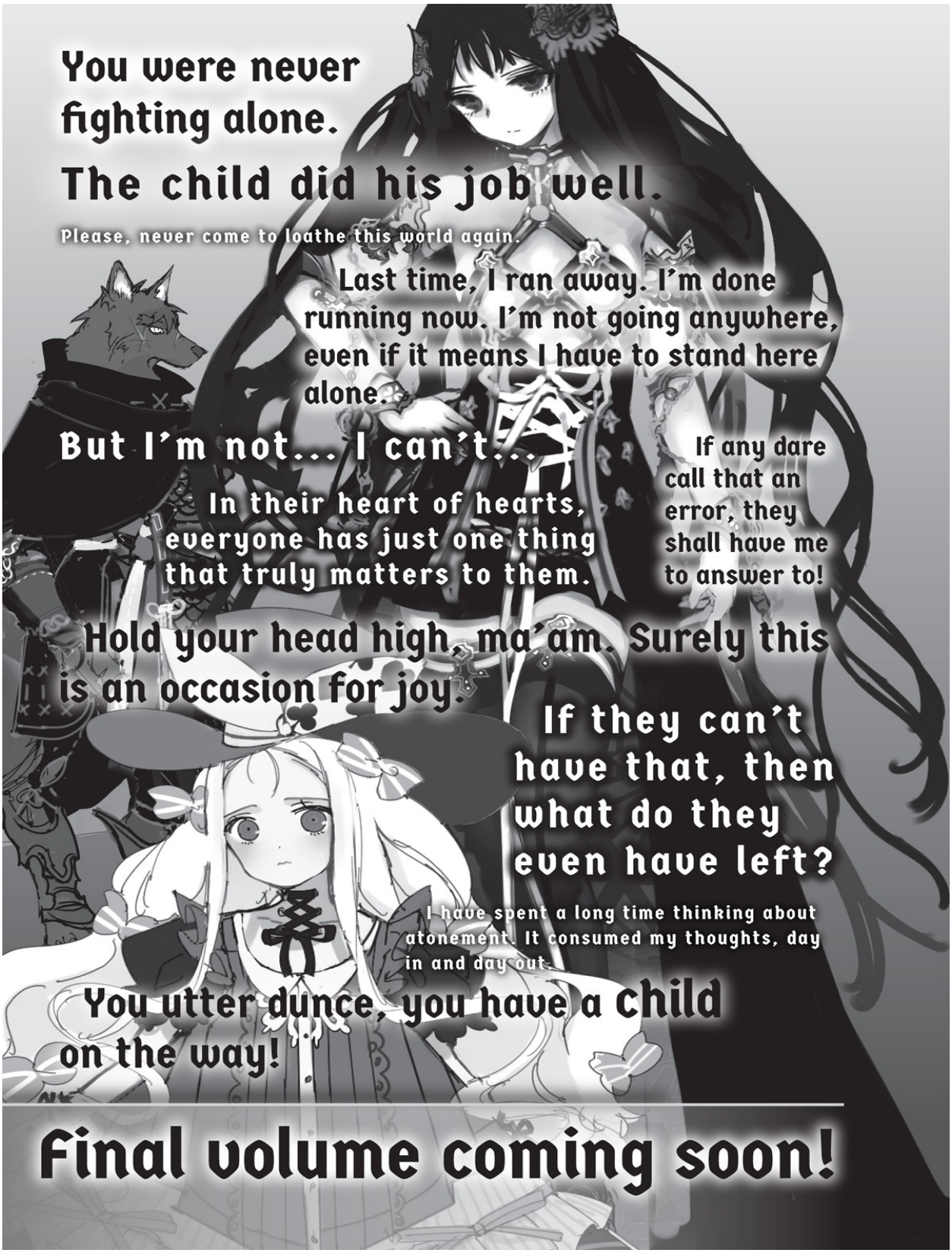
This is a tale that lies beyond the one of admiration, folly, and love—

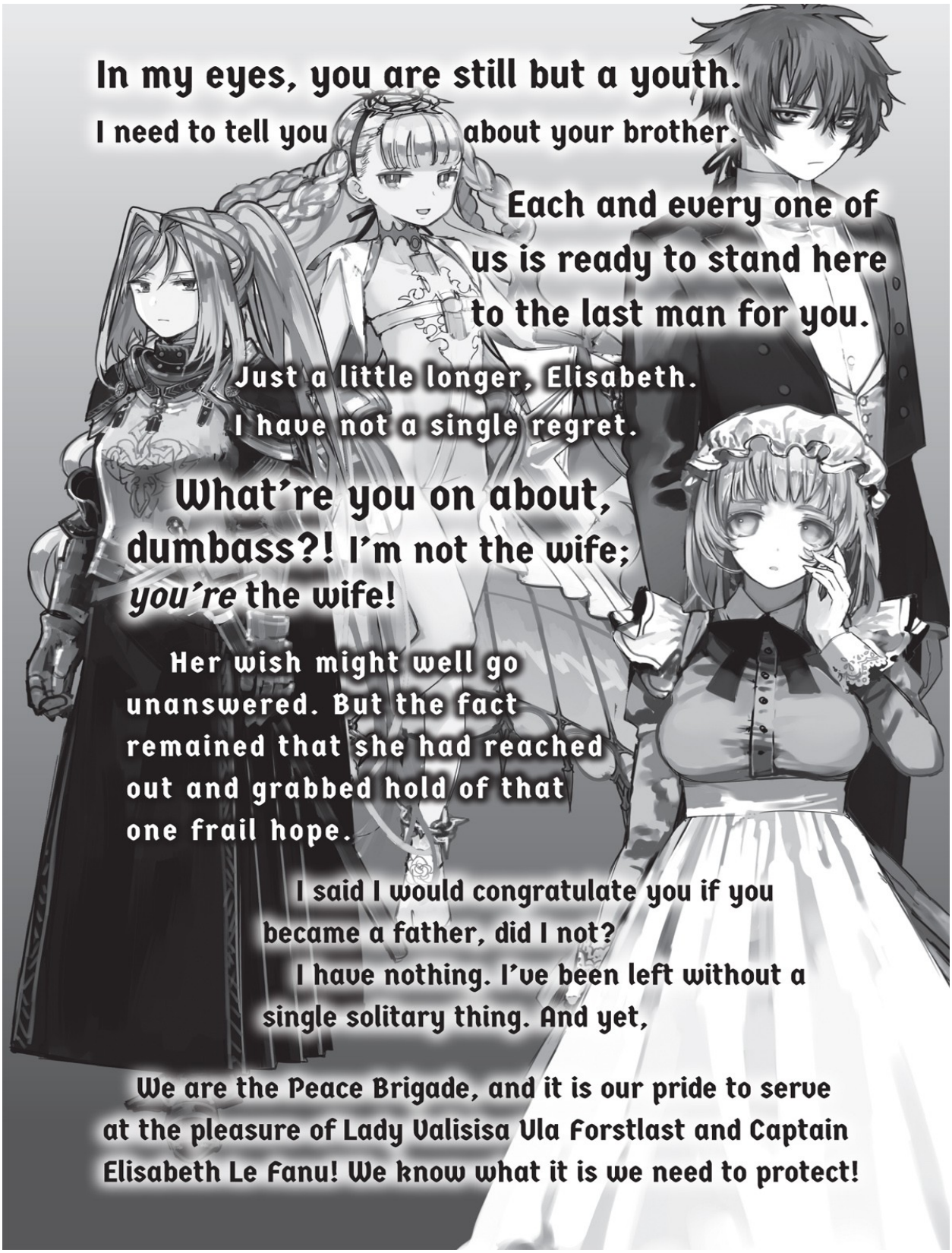
—and it's one of repentance, dreams, and hatred.

I hope you'll accompany me one final time.



Fremd Torturchen


You were never fighting alone.
The child did his job well.
Please, never come to loathe this world again.
Last time, I ran away. I'm done running now. I'm not going anywhere, even if it means I have to stand here alone.
But I'm not... I can't...
In their heart of hearts, everyone has just one thing that truly matters to them.
If any dare call that an error, they shall have me to answer to!
Hold your head high, ma'am. Surely this is an occasion for joy.
If they can't have that, then what do they even have left?
I have spent a long time thinking about atonement. It consumed my thoughts, day in and day out.
You utter dunce, you have a child on the way!
Final volume coming soon!


In my eyes, you are still but a youth.
I need to tell you about your brother.
Each and every one of us is ready to stand here to the last man for you.
Just a little longer, Elisabeth.
I have not a single regret.
What're you on about, dumbass?! I'm not the wife; *you're* the wife!
Her wish might well go unanswered. But the fact remained that she had reached out and grabbed hold of that one frail hope.
I said I would congratulate you if you became a father, did I not?
I have nothing. I've been left without a single solitary thing. And yet,
We are the Peace Brigade, and it is our pride to serve at the pleasure of Lady Valisisa Vla Forstlast and Captain Elisabeth Le Fanu! We know what it is we need to protect!

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